



edited by Algis Budrys

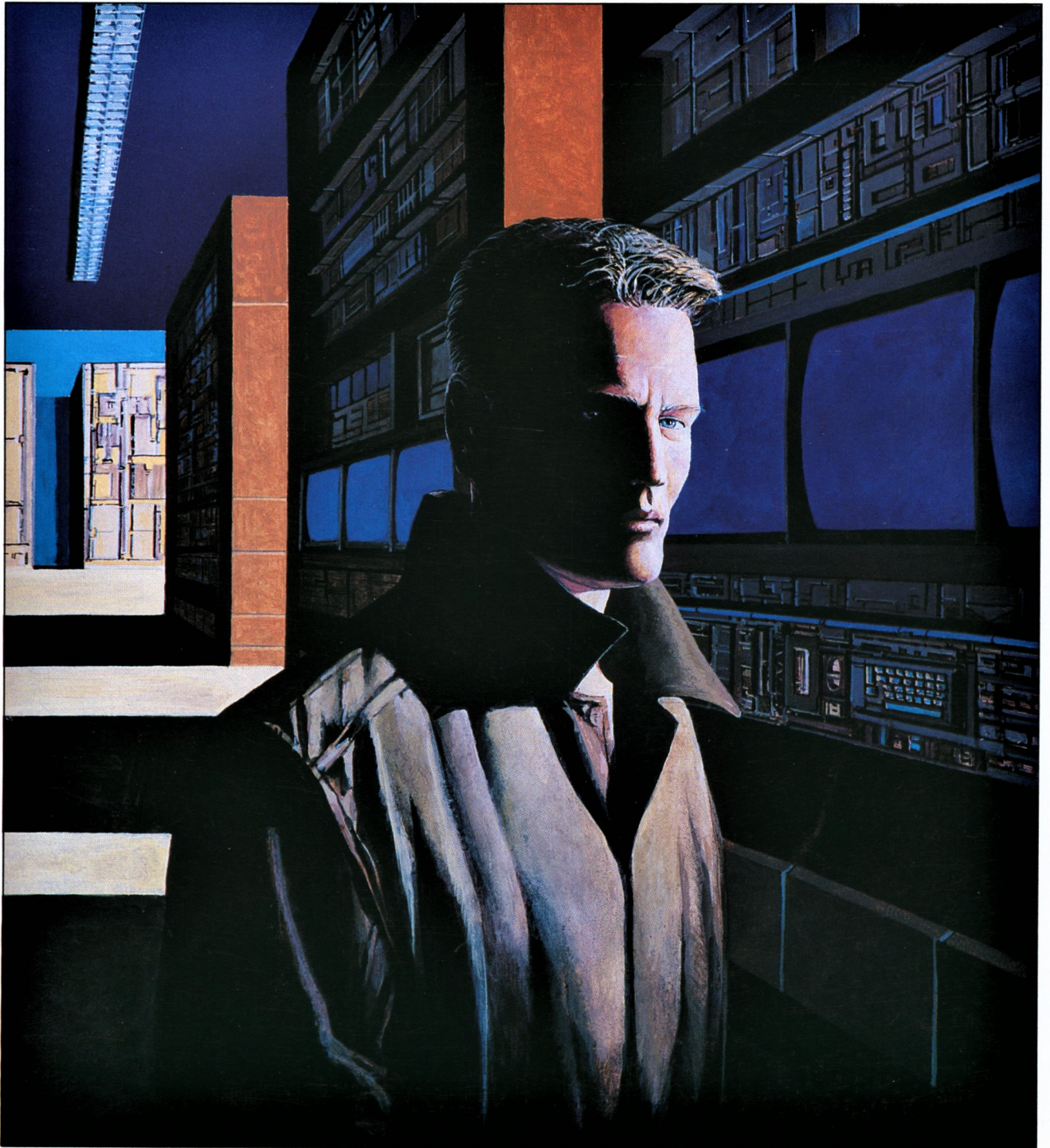
tomorrow

No. 5

SPECULATIVE FICTION

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WILLIAM BARTON • STEVE RASNIC TEM • JOHN PARK • OTHERS



tomorrow

SPECULATIVE FICTION

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EDITORIAL



I went to the supermarket the other day, and leaned against the glass on the fish counter. (You are more or less tempted to, even though a hand-lettered sign says not to, if your shoulders and hip are sore and the guy behind the counter doesn't see you for a while.) The guy behind the counter finally noticed me and said, brusquely, "Don't lean on the glass." He did not ask me what I wanted, and after a while I went away, and with a sense of despair told Walter, a front-end man, that it seemed to me the fellow behind the fish counter could also have asked me what I wanted. But he didn't, and so I didn't buy the swordfish. Walter sprang to the interstore phone, without saying a word to me. And after a beat I went away.

You may wonder why. Well. (A) it seems to me that the first part of the ideal solution would have been for the supermarket to make the glass on its case more secure, or fix it to make it impossible to lean on it. That's instead of telling the customers what they can't do. Then, (B) the guy behind the counter should have asked me what I wanted, and not brusquely. (C) Walter should have said *something* to me—preferably something nice—before leaping to the phone. Instead, the transaction was instantly between him and the guy behind the counter; I didn't matter a damn, and was at once completely out of the loop.

But this is the same supermarket that had a sale on ground turkey at 99 cents the pound, but continued to show \$1.29 a pound on the shelf. I had to check the price with the guy behind the meat counter, who told me that the price was 99 cents but they hadn't had time to change the sign. But it didn't matter, he said, because the checkout counter bar code reader would read it at 99 cents.

Which of course it did. But it seemed to me that the point of the sale was being missed. So I told one of the big managers, and he thanked me nicely and said it would be fixed. But it wasn't. This after an ad campaign, blanketing an area with a population of about six million, talking about 99-cent turkey among other things.

Then, there's the matter of the tuna cat food, which for months was hidden behind the chicken cat food because the label color is *almost* the same, so the shelf stockers didn't differentiate. Then there was the time the Taster's Choice coffee was the same in two different shelf locations, although one was supposed to be plain decaffeinated and the other was supposed to be robust blend decaffeinated. The shelf stockers had simply filled the shelf with the robust kind in both locations, pushing the regular sort toward the back. Which, incidentally, tells you they stock from the front.

And so forth. All this happened within a matter of two months, and is just the highlights—though I do want to say a word about

checkout people who converse back and forth continuously without so much as looking at the customer, and who mumble 'Hello,' when they say it at all, in as faint a voice as they can manage. They make mistakes, of course; one would have cost the store sixteen dollars if I hadn't taken the tape to the service counter and had them check it.

Now, you are wondering about a couple of things. One, what store is this. The answer is that it's part of an extensive supermarket chain, which is locked in fierce competition with a representative of the even larger chain, a few blocks up Chicago Avenue. And Two, what do I expect?

I'll tell you what I expect. I expect, in sheer self-interest, that this store—which is part of the Number 2 chain in what they call Chicagoland—would do what is necessary to not make the customer feel he is an imposition on an otherwise smooth-running example of incompetence.

The chain in fact rebuilt this particular store after its grand opening a few years ago—I don't know why; the old store was fine, competently staffed, and, as I said, quite new—and while the interior is now more logical and in some ways even nicer, the competent help is more or less gone. I don't know why. Possibly they've dropped the scale of pay. Possibly something else. But the bottom line is that the customer is made to conform to the store, and apparently nobody has thought how much better it would be if the store took the customer into account.

Now, this would be a peculiar editorial for this magazine, if it wasn't that this store is just one example of a growing trend everywhere to make the customer wrong; to deal with him or her as if with an intruder, and, often enough, to put up signs which boil down to "Do Not Disturb Our Arrangements." I don't understand it. Things used to be much better in the bad old days, before merchants supposedly cared as much about customer satisfaction. I see it everywhere; the chain bookstore whose help does *not* know the stock and, furthermore, doesn't care—with a major competing bookstore right up the street, and another major competitor right down the street. A fast food restaurant, which had to move heaven and Earth to get permission to come into Evanston—whose help is so busy being fast they don't have time to be good. A major chain copy shop which gives widely varying prices, depending on who's clerking in the store—and, again, there are rival copying shops within a block or two.

It's stupidity. Sheer, downright stupidity, every day of the year. And we are drowning in it. Think about it—how many times a week do you have to put up with it, and why do you have to put up with it? It's easier and cheaper to do it right; why do they do it wrong? Inimical Martians infiltrating our labor pool? What?

— Algis Budrys

tomorrow

SPECULATIVE FICTION

October, 1993

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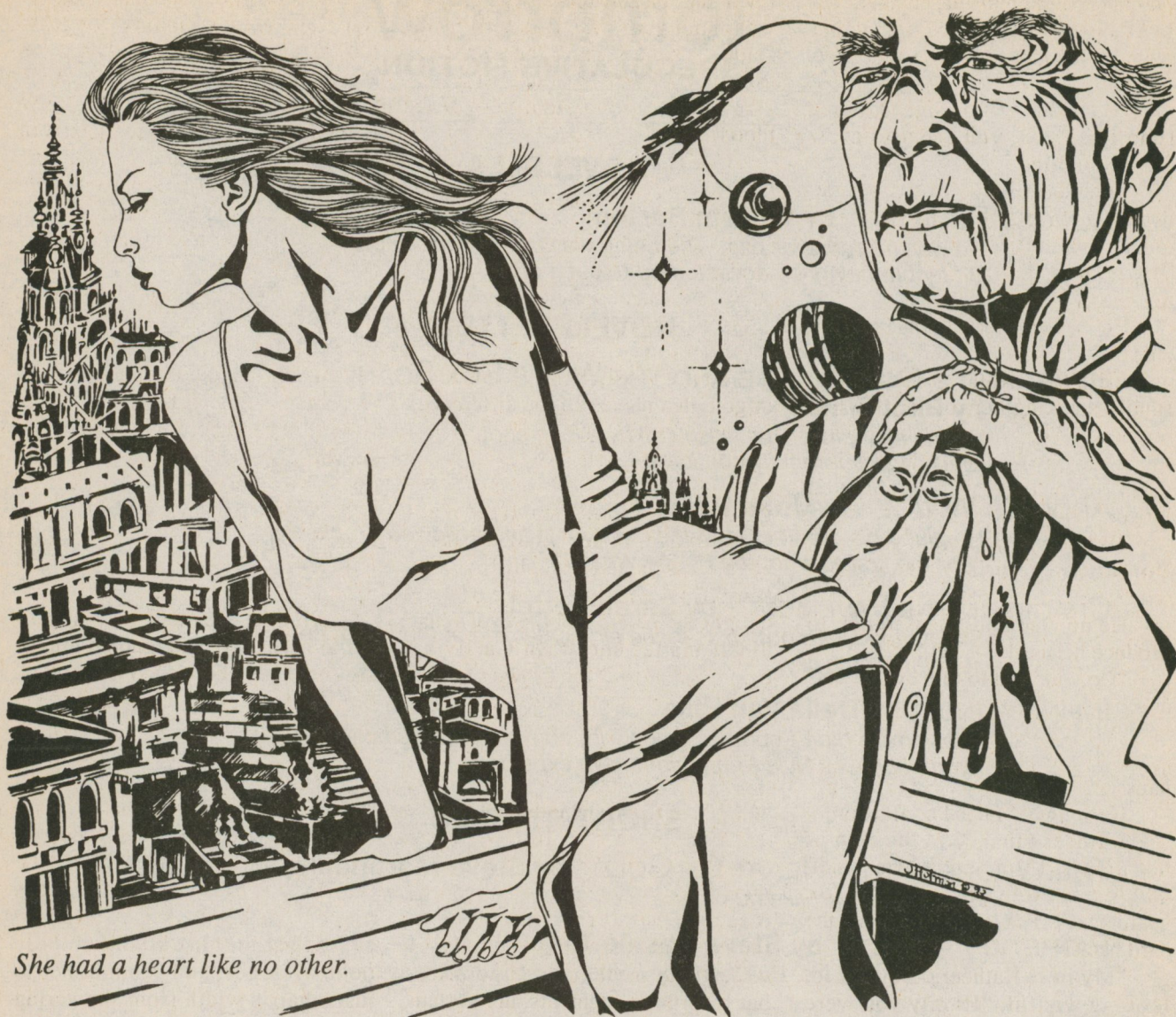
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Cover by David Lee Anderson, © Copyright 1993, David Lee Anderson,
"Machines" was inspired by the cover.
Illustrations by Kandis Elliot, Kelly Faltermäyer, Bob Hobbs, Judith Holman,
Margaret Ballif Simon, Susan Van Camp and Timothy Winkler.



She had a heart like no other.

THE WHORE WITH A HEART OF GOLD

Steve Martindale

Illustrated by Judith Holman

Commissioner Delfit, chief of the Committee of Public Works, was pulling up his trousers when she came naked from the bathroom. He he paused to gaze at her with loving eyes. She stole his breath when she stood in the nude, a graceful, blonde-haired vision of classical beauty. He smiled as he drank in her exquisite form. Artistic perfection glowed in each detail, from her oval face, with big blue eyes and upturned nose, wreathed by fine golden hair, to her large, rounded breasts and long, slim legs. Even the delicate pubic line, as hairless as a child's, had a finely sculpted look, etched in smooth, clean marble. She could make an old man feel young again, and a weary

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bureaucrat like himself, encumbered by the burdens of office, remember what it was like to be free and foot-loose.

"Oh, Katheer," he sighed, "each time I see you, you seem to grow more beautiful."

"You have a sweet imagination, dearest Yashil," she responded with a coquettish smile. "I'm not a bit different from the last time we were together."

He secured his trousers and stepped forward, taking her in his arms. He kissed her, his left hand fondly stroking her round, flawless buttocks. "These sessions are always too short. Next time, we'll spend an entire night together, maybe even longer."

"Whatever you want is yours. You know the price. Speaking of which...."

He nodded and released her, to produce his card.

"Do you want to turn away?" she asked.

"Why? I know what happens."

"To preserve the illusion, perhaps...."

He smiled. "I need no illusion."

Katheer plucked at the skin of her right hip to reveal a bare panel, and inserted the card in a slot. He heard a soft click, and she handed the card back.

"My little Katheer," Delfit said, looking wistful. "If only you were real...."

"Aren't I? I'm as real as your fondest dreams," she purred, kissing the fingers of his right hand. "I'm as real as love and passion."

"But not as real as flesh."

She smoothed the skin on her hip and put her arms around his neck again. "What would you do if I were?"

"Marry you, keep you with me always. I love you."

"I love you, too."

"I know." He showed an adoring smile. "You have a heart of purest gold, my angel."

"As a matter of fact, I do. Gold provides me special power, allows me to approximate emotion. Without it, I'd be cold and oh-so-businesslike.

I wouldn't be able to show you how I feel about you." She tilted her head aside. "There's one thing I have to ask, sweet Yashil: Why do you prefer a newvoflesh whore to a flesh-and-blood?"

"Because you seem sincere when you say you love me, and love being with me."

"Which I do. I love *every* man I sex."

"But when a flesh says that, she doesn't sound quite honest. She lacks the essential something that makes intercourse satisfying. It's your heart of gold that makes all the difference. But why do you ask?"

"Demographics," she said.

She made a daily trip to the marketplace, to see what the merchant vessels had brought from the stars, fine delicacies and curios to delight the palate and the eye. What did it matter she wasn't a living being, but an android grown in a tissue creche to meet specific standards of sexuality and beauty preferred by so many male humans? She had the same needs and desires as any flesh, and, like a flesh, she indulged them.

She preferred fine edibles, thanking her makers for the ability they had bestowed upon her to enjoy food. She wasn't powered by manufactured fuels or energized rods, as were many of her contemporaries, but by organic elements, her system converting the calories into power in a fashion which mimicked the human system. Some thoughtful maker (a woman, she believed, who had a female love for fattening things) had made certain she would relish every bite. Unlike an organic female, she couldn't grow heavy — excess calories were stored in fuel cells hidden in her breasts, to be recalled between meals or in leaner times. There were days when she went without food altogether, to expend some of that excess.

With the merchants just in from their long buying trips, filling the marketplace with a wealth of novel fineries, a half-dozen new kinds of edibles had been brought planetside. Having been tested to make sure they

were acceptable for human consumption, they were displayed for all to see. At least three were still alive, no doubt meant for gourmets seeking the truly exotic—the city was rife with them—and Katheer gazed at each for a moment before deciding that as adventurous as she might have been, she had her limits. She settled on more familiar foods, and took her purchases home.

Her apartment bordered the dingier section of the city, forcing her to step over and around derelicts. They knew her and left her alone, so she could get by without their hands waving in her face, begging for alms. As she came to her apartment, she noticed a figure huddled beside the door, wrapped in a worn black cloak. He eyed her with a look of sullen hope, like one of the beggars too proud to demonstrate actual need, who felt dirty each time they submitted to necessity. She ignored him as she fumbled in her pouch for her key, but couldn't help casting furtive glances at him.

"Lady," he grumbled, "make up your mind if you see me or not. As it is, I'm cold and miserable."

"And why *should* I take note of a throwaway like yourself?" she retorted, a bland inquiry. In the beginning, her loving nature had caused her to think kindly of these poor wretches, and brought her to just a hair's width from showering each she met with love and comfort. But she'd since learned to steel herself against strong sympathy for them, because they invariably milked it beyond all reason, to the detriment of the benefactor. "What makes you any different from the rest of these aimless men, that I should be your audience?"

"Because if I bleed any longer, I'm going to die." The transient spread his tattered cloak to reveal blood caked along his side.

Katheer's eyes widened, and she put her groceries in the open doorway. She bent to help the man to his feet, supporting him as she led him inside. She wouldn't have been so helpful to a stranger if his wounds weren't so grave and apparent, lest

he knock her over the head and rob her. But she felt for him. Like all the rest, he was a lost soul in a world filled with lost souls, looking for whatever sparse comfort life apportioned from its miserly purse. But unlike the rest, he had been so badly injured, he could do her no harm. All her street wisdom notwithstanding, she simply couldn't let him die.

Katheer settled him in her bed, set her groceries on a table, and went to the bathroom to wet a cloth. Being lifted to his feet had aggravated the bleeding, and he groaned with pain. When she came out of the bathroom, she found him unconscious, his breathing slow and shallow. She cleaned the injury and bandaged it from the medikit, noting as deep and ugly a knife wound as any this horrendous district had shown her, and let him sleep.

He awoke hours later with a ravenous hunger, and she brought him food from the kitchen. Between the chewing and swallowing, he managed to explain he'd been living on the outs for the better part of six months, since he jumped ship from a Militia vessel out of the Far Stars Cluster. The Militia lost men that way all the time, so they'd long ago given up searching for him—there were always more where he came from. He hadn't taken anything of value from them, so they had no burning desire to get him back. He'd lived among the street people since then, eating what he could, whenever he could, and sleeping in doorways or even on the bare ground, until someone robbed him of his warm jacket, putting a knife in him when he objected. That had happened right outside her door—he couldn't find the strength to crawl away. He hadn't eaten in days, so it had seemed he was meant to die.

"Why did you believe that?" she asked, when he'd finished.

"All those days without food, and then a knife in my side," he replied with a fatalistic air. "Some things seem like omens, lady."

"What's your name?"

"Jakoviet."

"Well, Jakoviet, you can't stay here long. I'm a whore, not a hosteler. My clients don't care for an audience when they visit me."

He peered at her with resentful eyes. "Excuse me, please, for having no money. I'd pay your sexing fee, if that's what it takes to let me stay awhile before I go back out to face the world. But as it happens, I have nothing but what I'm wearing." The sarcasm filled his voice with thick hostility.

"You can stay for a while, but just until you're stronger. That's my best offer."

Jakoviet nodded. "Sorry. I realize the position this puts you in. I'm sorry for sounding so ungrateful."

She smiled. "I understand. You've been through quite an ordeal."

"What's *your* name, by the way?"

"Katheer."

He grinned. "Katheer, you're a whore with a heart of gold."

She smiled again. "You don't know how true that is."

Jakoviet needed three days, mending and growing stronger, before he could sit up. Professional medical treatment would have healed him in a day, but he didn't care to be brought under anyone's scrutiny—though the Militia rarely searched for deserters, they still grabbed anyone they recognized as "a lost lamb." So he'd let his body do the work. Katheer understood, and allowed him the dignity. During that time, they talked about their lives, and she came to see him as far more pleasing a man, just as someone to converse with, than were most of the sexing partners she'd had. He made no advances on her for a gratis ride, as others might have done, having gained the friendship of a whore. He wasn't sexless, but he wasn't consumed by his needs, either. He seemed content just being with her.

"You said you're from Tuturos," she remarked at one point. "What does a Tutturian do at his leisure?"

"Enjoy a woman's company," he replied, with an airy toss of his hand.

"There's a time for sexing and a time to talk, and the two are very much separate things."

"It sounds interesting."

"Outworld women seem to find it a desirable trait." Jakoviet's laughter exploded. "You know, I find outworld women so amusing. They tell me how refreshing it is to meet a man they don't have to fight off, that most men are far too obsessed with sexing for their taste. Then they complain when I *don't* come on strong with them, demanding to know why I don't find them attractive. I think outworld women are as consumed by conflicting physical needs as are their men."

"Do you think that makes you better?"

"In what way?"

"Better than all of them. Because of your attitude."

"No. Just different."

She inwardly agreed that was so. Jakoviet held a special attraction for her she couldn't quite put her finger on. He seemed no different from any other man, not on the outside—she couldn't call him the best looking she'd ever met, nor the most charming. But she felt herself drawn to him nonetheless, and when he spoke, she found she hung on his every word. The things he laughed at *were* amusing, and she laughed, too; and when fury seized him on this subject or that, during one of their late-night talks, she felt her own anger rising, joining his in sympathy.

"What caused you to join the Militia in the first place?" she asked, in the midst of their latest conversation.

"It seemed very attractive at first," he answered, grimacing in a self-conscious fashion. "You've heard what their recruiters promise, I suppose, all the travel and glamor, and the chance to see the most exotic ports in the galaxy. I found little more than dehumanizing labor to it, the kind of work most people would rather starve than do, and the ports are few and far between. And even then, most of the places where star-men are welcomed are crooked and dirty, and as glamorous as the inside

of a chemical toilet. So I left, to see how my luck would fare on the outside."

"And how *has* it fared, generally speaking?"

"Poorly. Very poorly."

When Jakoviet was at last strong enough to leave his sanctuary, he stood gazing out Katheer's window at the city around them. She joined him to do the same. A grimy world lay beyond the pane, full of drifters and old buildings. Not far away, in a different direction, life seemed nicer, with newer structures and prettier people, the golden elite of this market city, on a planet on the far edge of the trade routes. But were *they* any better? Those shallow, meaningless people thought their glittery houses and shining towers gave them value. But the only true value she'd ever found lay within this man of depth and surprises called Jakoviet. While the lonely starmen roamed the cosmos, or hid in dark niches, frightened and watchful, he was yet free and intellectual, having lost none of his drive to the harshness of his grim way of life. How incongruous it all seemed, and how quickly her eyes became locked onto his.

"We're losing a lot," he said, with solemn regret.

"What are we losing?" she asked.

"Our apartness. Our cordial acknowledgment. We're no longer just friends."

She nodded, looking just as regretful now. She swallowed carefully.

When he took her in his arms, she didn't say a word. She'd expected it. More than that, she'd hoped for it.

She awoke, propped herself up on an elbow to gaze at his gentle face, and found him staring at the ceiling, looking as though he'd come to a difficult decision.

"You can love, I see," she said.

He exhaled a sigh. "I can love, I can smile, I can hurt, I can even feel sadness. They did a good job on me."

"I could tell. The way you bled and ate...."

Jakoviet raised himself so he could look her in the eyes. "When did you find out?"

"While we sexed, and I probed your body as a lover. We newvos are a bit more perceptive than the average flesh-and-blood." The corners of her mouth tugged back in an impish manner. "I don't think your makers expected this sort of thing to happen."

He shook his head. "They expected me to charm you, without the sexing, though obviously I was still made capable of that particular function. They weren't prepared for your attention to detail. Human error, and all that."

"Of course. Since you're not a flesh, what's your function?"

Jakoviet's smile lacked any trace of humor. "I'm a stealth. You're too well-protected by your makers for a flesh to be effective, so they sent me. They stabbed me and let me sit there by your door until you returned. They made sure I felt every moment of the pain, to give it the right amount of realism. It was meant to fool even another newvo."

"A newvoflesh stealth...." she murmured, at once surprised and impressed. "What have you come to steal?"

"Haven't you guessed, my feeling lover? Your heart of gold, to make a rich man even richer. Real gold is so rare, and the people who produce newvoflesh guard it too well. I'm sorry, my dearest Katheer, but I have no other choice."

She might have screamed, or pushed him away, or done *something*.... But he was quick, as stealths always were, particularly the artificial forms, with their accelerated movements, and something clicked in her head. Darkness fell upon her.

When she came to, she looked at her chest. The smooth flesh between her breasts appeared undisturbed, but she knew he had done his work. The panel had been popped open and the heart of gold removed. Interesting how swift stealthy hands could be, to do so much in mere moments. He sat nearby, looking glum as he watched her.

"I'm sorry, beloved," he told her. "I did what I had to."

She nodded. "I understand. You fulfilled your function. There's no need to apologize."

"You accept it so well. I didn't think you'd react any differently than this, but I had hoped...."

"No damage was done. I can still function. You've performed an able task. But you must go now—time spent with a non-flesh is time wasted. It gains no profit for those who administer me."

Jakoviet swallowed, disappointment and sorrow mingling on his face. He stood and walked to the door, followed by her curious gaze.

He stopped short of the door and looked at her. "There's one other thing I forgot to ask. How did it feel to be robbed by a newvoflesh stealth?"

"Why should I have *any* feeling about it?" she responded, sounding puzzled. "Just as I am, you're programmed to fulfill a specific function. You did as directed, with a flawlessness which is a credit to your makers. Why should you ask me for a reaction?"

He grimaced. "Demographics."

When next Commissioner Delfit lay with her, he noticed the change. There were no sincere overtures of affection—she didn't purr beneath him, or whisper the special words. She had become mechanical and passive, more so than any flesh-and-blood whore of the city. When he asked her why, and she told him she had performed her function in the manner proper for an artificial form, he felt heartsick. Never before had she broached the subject of what she was, not in all the times she'd sexed with him and stroked his thin gray hair, gazing into his eyes as though he were the only man she could ever love. He knew it would never be that way again, and felt his eyes grow hot and moist.

He would never know the deepest reason for the change. He would never know of her week spent with a man with smiling eyes and a ready grin, the man who stole her heart away. ■

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It's hard to blame Colin MacIntyre for feeling a little stressed but there's something he doesn't know about all the things he's had to do: they were the easy part.

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THE ARMAGEDDON INHERITANCE

**DAVID
WEBER**



Distributed by Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

PATHETIC FALLACY

Steve Rasnic Tem

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon



The park was his. But then she came.

David had had a foul taste in his mouth all day. A succession of images passed through his headache, and not one failed to grate. Suddenly the babbling brook began a high-pitched, strangling cat whine, falling eventually into something akin to a chortle. A chortling brook. A ripple of chaos traveled through the immediate countryside. Feelings were hurt, then torn apart like so much spiderweb. Lost, forgotten, untraceable.

It reminded David briefly of the explosion: the tumble through the air and the helpless grasping for direction. His own feelings embedded in his skin like jewelry he could not remove, there for everyone to see. Guilt and shame and hidden lusts patterning his skin, illuminating him with their burning, as he began the long fall through the darkness.

The flowers along the banks of the brook turned a bruised banana color, then a soiled mauve.

"Damn," he muttered under his breath. This section had been his best

work, the most advanced. He felt like ripping out that whole section of the park and starting over with completely new empathic cells and receptors.

But rather than do something he'd probably regret later—and hadn't he done enough of that?—David blocked the power to that part of the park. The constant undertone of echo and reaction faded out, abstract bits of sound straggling off just out of hearing. The vegetation grayed, leaving the outer edges of some plants near-transparent.

The liquid that followed the narrow channel through here—not water, not gel, something in between—settled into dark inertness.

He gave an exaggerated sigh, and there was nothing resembling an answering sigh.

A short distance away, a young couple paused and stared in alarm at the sudden devastation, but then the mechanics flying overhead kicked in, and intense, focused beams of light made a curtain around the power-

blocked section. After a few minutes the couple moved on.

Somewhere a bird laughed like a woman in pain. Somewhere the wind played sympathetic noise as it passed through the adjustable trees.

It was only an hour until closing, so there was hardly time for repairs, but David didn't want to leave it until morning. He lived in a bunker beneath the park so there was no real reason to stop. If he ran his diagnostics now he might still recall the way things had looked and felt—the particular colorings, the details of shade, the ambience—before they'd soured.

He began with the receptors that lined the banks of the brook. There were thousands of them, to allow minute variations in motion and coloring, each receptor attached to a device which output a certain amount of charge into the fluid. But periodic receptor centers maintained consistency and prevented the entire stream from becoming a madman's mirror.

So much gobbledygook. Things worked in spite of the words used to describe them. People, too, he suspected. Most machines, people machines and other simulacra, all the creations of action and reaction, were just too complicated. When things turned sour you had to work your way back from the beginning. Start with the receptors and the centers, but feel your way down the pathways until you discovered that point at which the sourness first began, where the kind impulse started to fade, the power to drift, the light to shift, the marriage to falter. You had to feel your way. Words weren't going to help you.

Words hadn't helped when his plane had gone down, when all his feelings had started exploding around him, searing his skin and wrapping suddenly exposed nerve-ends with strangeness. Automatic Maydays hadn't told his fellow murdering pilots what he was really going through.

You had to feel your way past the Maydays, the sudden roadblocks where it finally occurred to you to call for help, back down all the possible pathways of emotion until you found that juncture where the crisis had first occurred, that caused all the flowers and other vegetation to turn those nerve-jangling, impossible colors.

He was good at recognizing the various shades of emotion and following them for a time. But he didn't always know what to do with them. This was all new territory. Sometimes he just had to rip the whole thing out and replace it.

David paused in his work. One of the junctures between the brook and the first groupings of flowers—where there was a series of nested, scimitar-shaped beds—showed the first signs of trouble. Cells that had for some reason become too sensitive, threatening the tolerance of the entire series that came afterward, and brought to this cybernetic landscape such distinctive and disturbing coloring. Nothing to do but to rip them out of their sockets and replace them.

A screen floated around the side of one of the air-filtration spires, the

surrounding hindenburg almost invisible in the dim light. Mechanics flew below the thing, lightly tethered to it, shining their beams into any offered, upturned face. David didn't look away soon enough, and one of the things focused in on him. Suddenly his face floated up twenty stories high on the screen.

"What is this man feeling?" scrolled across the lower, message-area section of the giant balloon. There was a delay as the system made sure that David's face sank in. Despite himself, some natural embarrassment slipped out of him and the screen amplified it. The colors over his image's cheekbones and surrounding his eyes began to shift, subtly, teasing, as if the screen were about to reveal him, everything about him.

Someone began inputting a response to the question. "Worried. Nervous. Embarrassed." The initial responses were usually like that—jumbled, impressionistic, sometimes attempts at one-word interpretations of the victim's life. Outrageously judgmental at times. Or so it seemed, particularly when you saw your own face airspire-tall.

Usually something a little more articulate followed, from someone who had more time to think about it. But still pretty shallow interpretation, David thought. "He really doesn't like being seen on screen, but of course that's rather normal. (Probably a tech.)" That last bit seemed unnecessarily prejudicial. Then, "But his seems to be more than the usual amount of embarrassment. He feels naked, with an old-fashioned shame over that nudity."

Input ended, the system's canned response went: "Excellent responses, everyone! Remember, however, that human beings are INDIVIDUALS. You cannot always predict how anyone is going to FEEL. As in life, so in matters of good grooming. Get the shaver that truly FEELS your skin, that CARES about YOU. Get the shaver with eight different kinds of tactile receptors. Get NEURO-SHAVE."

Suddenly David's image was replaced by the image of the hightech

shaver in the ancient Victorian-looking package (Nu-Nostalgia stylings).

The screen showed his face again briefly with a scrolled "Thank you" in gigantic warm letters, blinked and moved away just as his sudden rush of confused anger began to be amplified. The system always seemed to know what you felt before you did.

He'd thought he'd pinpointed the problem. In the morning he could replace the cells and see how it worked.

Most of the customers were on their way out of the park. On his left a breeze had picked up, twisting a wall of vines into agitated patterns, bending broadleaf ferns back until they began to turn and grasp at each other, their colors subtly changing wherever they made contact.

There was always this sudden flurry of activity as the last customers left, as if the park fed on the human contact and had suddenly grown desperate as the food was being taken away.

A few scarlet-headed flowers began to bob, their spring-like stems turning tighter and tighter until several of the buds popped off and were carried away by the wind. A black-headed insect with large red eyes flew closer, paused with its wings beating furiously, then suddenly was right in David's face, so close he could see the individual microempathics that ran along its sides inside a yellow stripe. It seemed almost to explode as it jerked left, right, and flew away.

Everyone was out of the park now except he and a few maintenance techs. He took a stroll through the remaining sections, allowing the neutral receptivity of the park to calm him. In turn he further calmed the park, feeding his own quiet back into the raw cybernetic nervous system which surrounded him.

As the tall buildings and airspires surrounding the park began to take on their early-evening, greenish glow, he put in a request to Mechanics Control for the polaroid curtain before the exterior city could turn yellow, then white. He'd never cared for the city at night, or the people in it. He liked

to listen for his own heartbeat, the rhythm of his own breathing. He liked hearing them in the surrounding woods.

He walked through an old-fashioned night, only the soft optics running the length of the tree trunks to guide him.

He heard a scratching sound, wire on silicon.

Dozens of tiny crickets had crawled up onto the walkway, their hind legs scratching luminous red and blue trails across the hard, shiny surface. Suddenly they tumbled over one another and began to struggle, changing color spasmodically, their wings making high-pitched whining, then metallic groaning sounds.

David looked around. No one had any legitimate purpose to be there.

He tried to notify the maintenance techs but they were all gone. He slipped back into a thick patch of vegetation, the stalks and larger leaves stiff and protective around him. Then he waited.

There were other signs of another presence in the park. Tiny silicon slivers of lichen and furred metallic moss crept up the trees in Rorschach patterns of glowing shadow, like arms and articulated fingers clawing the intricately grooved bark. Silicon dew webs grew out of spiny bushes and multiplied. The bushes expanded and began to move so vigorously in the nonexistent wind that they looked like dancing spiders.

The girl must have thought that everyone had left, because after an hour or so he saw her on the pathway, moving cautiously, with the too-tight movements of someone who had never visited the park before. Someone who waited with no small amount of anxiety for the solipsistic symphony of naturalistic reactions. The kind who expected flowers to turn suddenly into great monsters of the id.

She was young, maybe seventeen, maybe less, dressed in Madman or Starvation clothes—he couldn't tell which in the available light. Once a fireowl—one of the few out-and-out fantasy creatures in the park, trig-

gered by combinations of bodyheat and excitement—burst into pseudo-flame near her face. She jumped back in terror, then laughed, then stood amazed and quiet as the bird danced around her head, its pewter- and chrome-colored feathers sliding back and forth over its orange-burning belly like a fan dancer's, its large eyes mirrors imaging her face, then solid discs the color of her cheeks.

With the owl's light he could better see her head: the first third of her skull shaven and a highly illegal crescent-shaped surplus survival pack attached. She'd had the thing enamelled a brilliant cobalt blue, and some sort of flower painted in the center, but that didn't alter its basic functionalities. Within that deceptively compact container there would be light, fire generation, water purification, empathic-based weaponry. He'd heard that a lot of the orphans wore them. You normally didn't see orphans in the district surrounding the park, and David didn't venture far outside that district.

Below each of the girl's eyes was an irregularly shaped shiny dark patch, too dark and too shiny to be mere shadow. Some of the kids had them implanted; they usually contained simple receptors that changed the color of the silicon surface to match their mood. If her weapons were active—and he had no reason to doubt that they were—these probably had targeting receptors as well, sympathetic to eye movement and keyed to aim and fire the weapons she carried on her skull. She was one tough orphan, no doubt about that.

When she turned her head he saw that she also had a California-shaped patch of silicon embedded on the left side of her face, a half-inch circle of skin still showing where Sacramento would be. He doubted that this one had ever been to Sacramento, however, at least not of late. They'd been waging a fierce campaign against street orphans there.

The fireowl began to screech, twisting its head awkwardly and spreading its wings until seams and armatures were popping, metal dropping swiftly and ungracefully to the

path. The girl raised her head. There was a flash and the bird exploded. All around him, plants rattled their heads. The grass subvocalized a moan.

Tiny insects danced over David's skin as he ran toward the girl, each touch a pinprick. He reached for the infant-sized bird smoldering on the sidewalk, touched it, then jerked his hand back. Fire blackened, it looked.... The clockwork forest began to buzz. The bird's ruptured metal and plastic shell had had the texture of ruined flesh.

David turned. "Why'd you do that?"

The girl stood with legs shoulder-width apart, hands waist-high, knees bent slightly. She moved slowly to the side, keeping her face pointed directly at him, the front third of her scalp pushed forward. In the dim light the crescent appeared to ride her like an enormous lethal parasite, lending her face a soft blue aura.

"Shaky," she said, with a brief hint of a laugh. "Made me one shaky orphan, this one. Heh."

"There was no need," he said, embarrassed by the grief he could hear in his own voice. He stepped away from the blasted corpse.

She seemed to relax. Then she nodded and David jerked visibly, staring at the flower above her brow—a rose, he thought, now that he was closer.

"Heh! Not law are you, huh?" She laughed.

"No. No policeman. No guard. I just work on these things." He gestured toward the ruined owl without looking.

"Heh." She glanced at the owl. "Sorry. This orphan is sorry."

David was surprised to believe her. She moved out of her crouch and walked toward him. Closer, the shiny patches under her eyes faded into orange, then a cloudy Caucasian color. "Bee," she said, reached up and stroked his arm. The silicon patches turned pinkish, with occasional highlights, coruscating blue. Then he noticed how badly done the implants had been. Scar tissue bubbled up over the edges of the silicon, and it looked as if she had cut the

scar tissue away a number of times on her own.

"Orphan Bee, they call me. You?"

"David. You shouldn't be here. We're closed." A lost siren rose up out of the city surrounding the park. The trees began to stir and change, until the mechanics switched on their dampers to soften the outside noise. David drew away from her. "That's you they're looking for, isn't it?"

"I'm no harm. Not to David." She moved in, her head tilted back as if to emphasize her harmlessness, her neck becoming more exposed. The patches looked almost blood red, flowing. "David. Heh." She looked small-boned, despite the muscle. Her eyes appeared to bleed. Now he could see the map of California on the side of her face, the shoreline a twisted ridge of scars.

Her lips began to bleed. Tiny broken fragments of silicon had been inexpertly embedded in the soft tissue there. A street job. An orphan job. He wondered when she'd last seen her family.

"David and Bee." Her face ran with a red aura. She reminded him of a promiscuous child, always looking for some stranger to prop her on his lap. He backed away and California darkened. "David and Bee, together?"

"I can't, Bee. You're too young. On the street, but you're still just a child."

The San Francisco Bay filled with fire. She kicked him somewhere around his head and he went down very fast. He could hear the drunken mayflies beginning to break into military song. Again he wished the Air Force had taught him more than how to drop death out of a plane.

David's last year in the Service, there'd been this persistent rumor that the Brazilians had developed some sort of weather control to keep the elements sympathetic to their purposes, some new way of doing things derived from ancient theories of sympathetic magic now applied to cybernetic controls.

There had always been rumors. As a pilot he'd never felt completely



in control of the technology he used, and he would always wonder if there was anyone who did. Even with the receptors, the microempathics, permitting you to aim precisely where you looked, and in feedback permitting you, in turn, to look much more precisely. Gracefully permitting you to fire at the best time. Graciously allowing you to kill far more effectively than anyone before in history.

The lie was that this was supposed to make you feel more in control. The day's Air Force was supposedly for men and women who weren't afraid to take a little responsibility.

But they didn't know. Nobody could know what you were thinking, what you were really feeling. They couldn't feel exactly what you felt. All they could know for sure was that you went ahead and decided that the trigger should be pulled, that that alien human being whom you couldn't know about, whom you couldn't get inside even if you wanted to, was going to have to be blown into sausage. For all their empathetic triggers, all their receptive targeteers, all they knew was that you had accepted the order to kill and passed it on, made it a fact, not what you felt about that order.

At the time of the accident they'd been on a run over Brazilia. It was supposed to have been a simple one. Three targets: two new power plants and computer headquarters for the South American commands. Standard procedure: absolutely no atomics were to be used. They'd taken out one of the power plants when the first enemy flyers had appeared.

Again the rumor of weather control had come to mind. The four black checkers had dropped out of clouds David hadn't even noticed before. When one of the trailing clouds had suddenly glowed a soft pink, David had twisted his head and the plane spun out in an evasive maneuver. He'd felt his teeth rattle and his eyes burn; he'd been firing his lasers back at the checkers without even realizing it. His brain had seemed to be rising out of his head and off his shoulders as if on its own, attempting to escape the cockpit. His brain had dragged the

plane up with it, then everything had fallen away as he'd come up underneath one of the checkers, and thought the thing dead, the tell-tale pain near the front edge of his temples stabbing out and into the plane trapped in his eye-scope. He'd unconsciously begun to chatter the death word, but the fact came too quickly for him to finish.

He hadn't been able to see the pilot come apart inside the fireball he'd made. And he certainly hadn't been able to feel him.

Almost instantly David had been through the death, flying through wisps of smoke, minute debris powdering the nose of his plane. As if he'd thought the whole thing, and nothing more.

He'd started to turn, thinking he would check, wondering crazily if he could find a body, a fact. When lightning had filled the sky.

The flash that got him had been so beautiful, white and pure. As if someone's god had finally deigned to speak to him in the one way he'd learned to understand.

His ship had come apart, but the only fire had been layer upon layer of complex receptors and microempathics twisting and burrowing into his flesh. His own pain had fed back through his body in endless loops of programmed purgatory. His own feelings had become maggots chewing up his corpse.

And yet, unaccountably, he'd felt a certain power as, wrapped in mirroring streamers of pain, he'd fallen the long miles. It had only been a weapon, after all, even if it had been the weather.

Plummeting, he'd felt reassured that even God couldn't find him, wrapped so tightly within his screaming self.

When they had finally got him more or less rebuilt, when he had finally got out of that hospital and retrained, David would have only one request of his lovers: "Don't ever tell me you know how I feel. Don't even act like it."

"Accident?" she said.

David tried to lift his head,

but something blocked him. For a moment the sensation of falling rose and grabbed his head, shook it from side to side, laid it back down. He opened his eyes and there was the orphan girl leaning over him like some city sprite in leathers.

"No accident." She looked earnest. "David's a war baby. Heh. Killer fly hatched you." She laughed.

"No. No accident. I guess to do what I had to do you try not to think about being blasted out of your seat. And I guess that makes it even easier to avoid thinking about blasting other people. So when it happens, it's like it's an accident. God suddenly finds you, and here you'd been thinking you were below notice." He watched her face turn dull on him. He felt like an idiot having talked to her that way. An orphan. He'd been in the park too long. "You're hungry, I guess," he said.

The sharpness came back. "Heh." She smiled, and there were black chips affixed to her teeth, crosses and starburst patterns.

David started to get up, but felt bundles of fibers, sharp edges under his palms. "The hell..." He looked around him. The immediate vicinity looked like a miniature battle zone: sections of grass uprooted, the silvered roadmaps of circuitry exposed, trees and shrubs blasted, flower beds savaged, here and there long silicon fibers hanging loose in the breeze like cobwebs. He climbed to his feet and turned on Orphan Bee. "You did this?" He tried to hold onto his tears. He felt some small bit of muscle twitch once, twice near his right cheekbone. He might have hit her if he hadn't been so scared of her.

"You!" she shouted, with disproportionate anger. "Dreamer! Shouter! You did this!" She gestured vaguely around her. "Did all this, warbaby!"

David walked around the torn-up section of the park. Receptors and empathics were crushed into the ground. Receptors hung from long strands in the vegetation, like spiders pulled off and thrown.

They'd always had this rule in the park. You weren't supposed to sleep here, because of the dreaming.

He wondered how much of this was her doing, and how much his own responsibility.

"They know, huh?" Orphan Bee twisted a finger against her skull as if she were trying to bury it there. "They feel what you feel." Saying that, she bent over, holding herself in an exaggerated shudder.

Despite his best instincts, he smiled. "No, Bee. They just *seem* to feel what you feel. They just *seem* to know, to be empathic. It's just an illusion, just a name. They react to what they can observe, what they can probe for. Muscles and nerves, fluids and chemicals in the body. That's what they 'see.' They can't read your mind."

Bee looked as if she wanted to be relieved by that, but she didn't appear to be completely convinced. "They lie. Heh," she finally said, her lips twisting into a small smile. "Chip heads, that's all they are. Heh."

"Chip heads. I like that. But no, the park doesn't really lie. It just feeds back exactly what it senses, as far as it's able to sense. Nothing more. Sometimes we just need to feel like it's more than that. That it's empathic. Sometimes we just want someone, some thing to really know what it is we're feeling."

Bee shook her head vigorously and David laughed. He watched her pick up various pieces from the ruins, dropping them quickly if something didn't look quite right to her. He'd been talking to her as if she understood everything he was saying. He felt like a child again, talking to his console at the learning center, responding with animation as the voice behind the screen guided him through his lessons, making believe that every word he said counted somehow to that unseen intelligence, that somehow it could know who he really was, under the skin.

The park was supposed to be an analogue for the city parks of old. Sometimes David thought it was really an analogue for the old funhouses and their arrays of distorting mirrors.

Bee had lifted up his shirt. She was feeling the old scars on his back, where they'd removed all that shrap-

nel, all that feeling ware, those hard little parasites of emotion. Receptors and empathics. Maggots and fleas.

"Pretty," she whispered. David clenched his jaw, but he let her touch him. The patches under her eyes glistened snow-white. He reached up and touched her face, running his fingers over the ropy scar tissue. "David and Bee feel," she said. "David and Bee."

He tried to remind himself that she was just a child, a lethal child at that, but he couldn't decide whether it was true. At the moment, he suspected that most of what he thought about her might be a lie.

David tried to think about what it must be like out on the street, stealing, killing—like that, even worse than the way he had done it. He tried to think about what it was like being orphan—no parents or deciding, as had most of them, that parents were irrelevant. Feeding on chemicals, nerve implants, pain. But he was fooling himself. He was lying to himself. He couldn't know. He felt pathetic.

But he still continued to hold on to her. And after a time he grasped and pressed as desperately hard as she. Despite the lies.

He fed her everything he could, but she wouldn't eat much. She wouldn't touch anything, in fact, that wasn't in a can. He tried not to be arrogant about it. He tried not to presume what was best for her, but arrogance had been a large part of his nature for a very long time.

She never took off the blue survival pack, even when they made love. After a time it didn't bother him so much.

One afternoon he even tried to write her a poem, but he soon discovered that the poem was really about himself. Much later he would realize he shouldn't have been surprised.

Sometimes the park embarrassed him when they were together. It became childishly suggestive. Or too much like the illustration for a bad poem. Pastels and sweet smells, animals who were too calm. Once, irritated, Bee had blasted a lightly tinted

rabbit, and it had been David who felt like the child. These were all David's feelings that were showing; he didn't know where in the park he would find hers.

He would never tell her that he loved her. He knew she wouldn't say it either. No matter what words they used, they'd never know if they understood each other.

One morning she woke him with a kiss; he looked up at her sad mouth. She had on all her gear. "Orphan time," she said. "Orphan Bee too long away from the street. On the street time, David. Bee bye time."

Then she turned, and by the time he got his clothes on she was out of his quarters and halfway across the park. He'd been afraid he'd take the ending badly, and he'd been right. He imagined her gone, and he could feel the clockwork nature around him filling with a low-level, agitated buzz. He chased her, and as they struggled amid the dry throat rattle of doves and walls of gray, writhing ferns, she didn't move to hurt him, although at times he thought she was considering it. Later he would think she should have done everything she could to escape him.

He wouldn't remember when it was he finally called the police. Sometime after she fell and hit her head, and after he knew he didn't have the words to apologize to her, to explain what he'd been feeling. He would tell her it was because she'd been hurt, and besides she needed a home, structure, someone to find her family. He'd only been trying to do what was best for her, he would say. She wasn't in control, obviously, carrying all that weaponry. And anyway, she was so young, too young to live for long like that. He'd done everything because he'd cared for her, he would remind her. Everything. He knew how she felt, but this was for the best, he would lie. He knew, he knew, he'd say again and again, repeating the pathetic lie.

She would spit on him when they took her away. And he would find blood in her spittle, and feel unable to wipe it off. ■

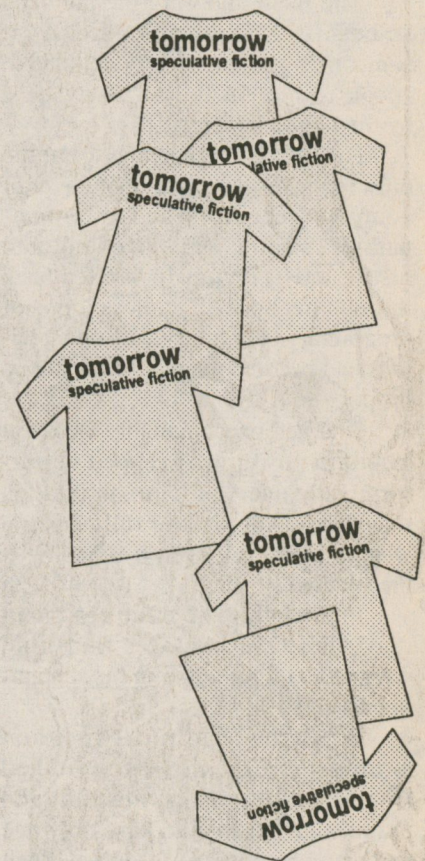
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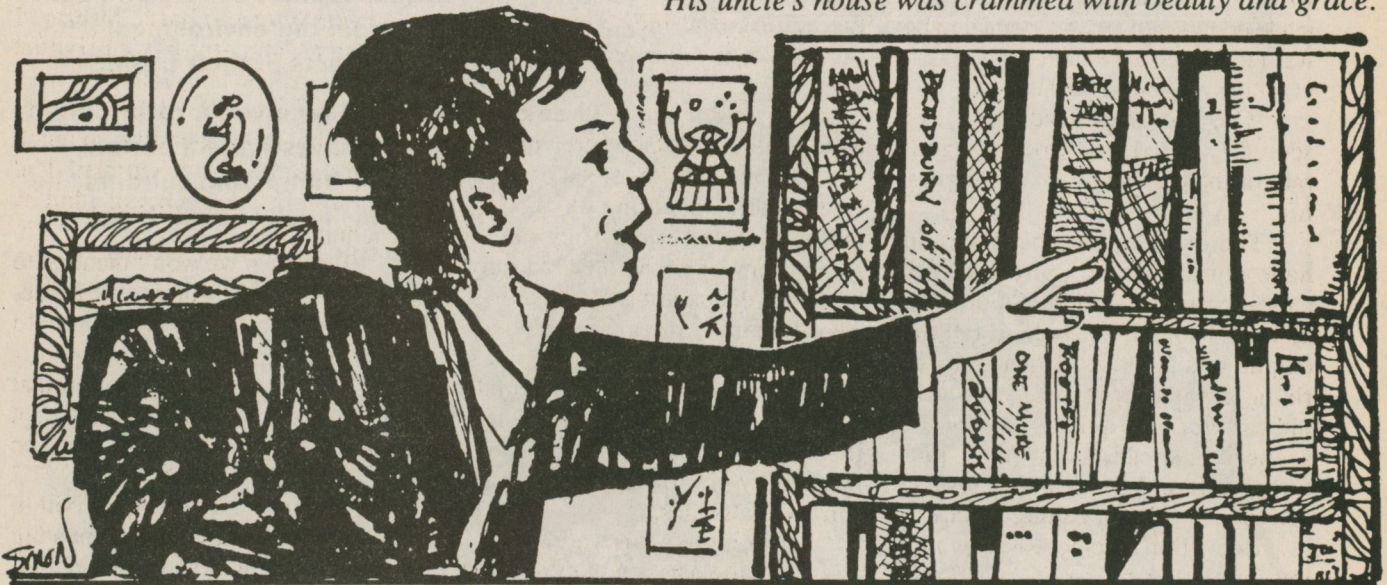
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THE LIBRARY OF LOST ART

Don D'Ammassa

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

His uncle's house was crammed with beauty and grace.



All art consists of dreams given substance, my uncle told me during that wonderful summer when I briefly shared his home. "The best of it transcends the artist and takes on a life of its own."

I often wonder why he let me have a free hand in his library at such an early age. Perhaps it was because he'd never entertained even an overnight visitor prior to my arrival, and the sudden responsibility of sheltering and amusing an eleven-year-old boy must have caught him completely unprepared.

I wasn't exactly thrilled myself, although my mother assured me she would complete the assignment in Zurich in time for me to return to my regular school in the fall. I tried to view my temporary living arrangements as an adventure, but the

prospect of spending three months in western Connecticut, which was after all even more provincial and therefore boring than Providence, did little to stimulate my imagination or my interest.

I had nothing against Uncle Dan, but I had nothing for him either. As far as I was aware, he'd only visited on one occasion, to attend my father's funeral, and the only impression that remained was of a tall man in very dark clothing who spoke slowly and with a very deep voice.

My mother must have apologized a dozen times before letting me board the bus in Providence. She'd originally planned to drive me to Uncle Dan's, but the date of the initial conference had been moved forward and time conspired against us. I kept telling her not to worry, that I

liked the idea of traveling by myself for the first time, but she insisted that I was a "brave boy" for trying to reassure her and that I shouldn't be frightened because the bus driver would help me if I had a problem.

The only problem I had was trying not to look too bored when the woman in the next seat insisted on telling me all about her grandchildren, illustrated liberally with pictures she kept in her bag. But I was determined that nothing should interfere with the pleasure of sudden freedom, and I did my best to act as I thought an adult might if caught in the same situation.

Uncle Dan had agreed to meet me in Tutford, and I had strict instructions to wait patiently until I was claimed. Mom's caution was unnecessary; I recognized him the

instant I set foot off the bus, a tall, thin man with short black hair in a very dark suit, standing just inside the terminal door. He looked uncomfortable and out of place, and when he caught sight of me, the expression on his face was a blend of anxiety and relief.

"You're my nephew John, I believe. Or do you prefer Johnny or Jack?"

"John will be fine, sir."

"Then John it is. Shall we go?"

I pulled the baggage check from my pocket and held it up, a red and white strip of cardboard. He stared but made no move to take it, seemed to be waiting for me to explain further.

"It's my baggage check."

"Oh, of course." Uncle Dan, as I soon discovered, was woefully ignorant of the practicalities of everyday life.

The drive to his house should have consumed an hour, but took closer to two. His elderly Studebaker appeared sound, but I could tell the engine was laboring. The novelty of riding in what I recognized as a very old car wore off quickly, as did the scenery. I mean, how many picturesque farm houses and fields can *you* look at without getting bored?

Uncle Dan's home was a sprawling farmhouse so remote that as far as I was concerned, he had no neighbors at all. Certainly none within easy walking distance. The house was elderly but had been freshly painted and appeared to be in good repair. Adjacent and linked by a glass-enclosed patio was a huge, modern barn, obviously of much more recent construction than the house. That seemed odd to me even before we got out of the car, because Mom had told me Uncle Dan wrote essays and poems for a living. Even to my unpracticed eye, it was obvious that the nearby fields were completely overgrown. There was no livestock, no farm equipment, and judging by the untrimmed rosebushes bordering the front of the house, it didn't appear that Uncle Dan did any gardening at all.

We each took one of my suitcases, and a minute later were inside.

The front door hadn't been locked, and Uncle Dan later told me he didn't even own a key. "If someone wants to get in that badly, they'll do it anyway, so what's the use?"

It was like walking into a museum. The front room was filled with works of art, mostly paintings and sculptures, in bronze, clay, blown glass, carved wood, and every other medium imaginable. Some of the pieces were "found art," that is, images assembled from pre-existing objects like nails and belt buckles and small tools and stuff. The walls were covered from the chair rail to the ceiling, the individual frames interlaced like an intricate mosaic, with no space wasted. I couldn't even tell what color the wall might be underneath; it was nowhere visible.

Sculptured forms stood or lay on free-standing shelving units, small tables and platforms. They ran the gamut from representational to surreal, as did the paintings and etchings. The disparate images were overwhelming not only in number but in variety. There was no segregation by school or subject matter or color or technique; cubist geometries were flanked by pointillist abstracts and surreal landscapes.

"Your room's this way."

I was too awestruck to respond, but I followed him up a broad stairway to the second floor and down a long corridor to a room that was four times the size of my bedroom back home. All of the walls we passed were similarly covered. An elaborately detailed representational landscape stood at the head of my bed, a skeletal church hovered in mid-air on the adjoining wall, and an armored knight wrestled with a red-eyed dragon just opposite.

"We can swap some of the paintings around if you'd like. There are plenty to choose from."

Which was the understatement of the day, but I replied in as level a voice as I could manage, trying to sound mature and sophisticated. "No, these are just fine."

I didn't actually see the library until that evening. It was already late in the afternoon and by the time I'd

gotten unpacked and arranged my clothes and things the way I wanted them, Uncle Dan was back asking me if I had any preference for supper.

I shrugged. "I can eat pretty much anything except broccoli."

"It's not one of my favorites either."

While he'd been speaking, his eyes slowly scanned the room, probably to see if I'd done anything to change the esthetics. He spotted the neat row of paperbacks I'd lined up on the dresser, and without a word brushed past me and leaned forward, head tilted to one side. "Salinger, Baldwin, Sturgeon, Barth, Mrozek. I must say, my sister has cultivated excellent taste in you, John."

"Yeah, well, she doesn't really think I should be spending so much time reading. She's worried I'm going to miss out on being a kid or something."

"Well, then we won't mention to her the Selby and Miller titles. Somehow I don't think Alice would approve."

I flushed, having forgotten that I'd included those from my secret collection of books Mom would be happier not knowing about.

That first supper is still vivid in my memory. Uncle Dan set out a big salad made with fresh greens including raw spinach, with big white mushrooms cut in slices, pitted black olives, chunks of two or three different kinds of cheese, sprinkles of bacon, sliced radish red and white, and long thin strips of different colored peppers, red, green, yellow, and orange.

"A proper meal is a work of art in itself," he assured me.

He mixed the dressing in a decanter and it was sweet and spicy and so good I could almost have eaten it alone. Then he cooked up little cubes of beef with chopped carrots and onions and potatoes and leeks and some other vegetables in an oversized skillet and served it over fresh brown rice. It was the best meal I'd ever eaten. I loved my mother very much, but cooking was never numbered among her skills. An elaborate meal at home was having more

than one vegetable with the meat course.

We didn't talk much while we ate. My mouth was too busy testing all those exotic nuances of taste and texture and I think Uncle Dan was still uncertain how to deal with me. He had seemed to relax a bit after seeing the books on my dresser, and I suppose I thought at the time he was just relieved to see I had something to do to keep me out of his hair.

"Would you like to see the library?"

We'd just finished eating and he was putting away the leftovers. The main course was completely gone; he'd cooked just exactly the right amount. "Sure."

He guided me to a sliding glass door, then through the enclosed patio I'd noticed earlier to a solid, wooden door. "I don't keep this locked, but it's best left shut, to keep the humidity out."

A moment later, I was in a dream world. The walls of the barn were lined with shelving from floor to ceiling, two and a half stories above, and there were free-standing units marshaled in tight ranks across the floor. A wrought-iron spiral staircase led up to a mezzanine, and both levels were fitted with those sliding vertical ladders that let you move them to wherever you need to climb to reach a particular book. There were paintings and sculpture here as well, but mostly larger pieces arranged on easels wherever there was enough open space. In one corner stood an enormous desk, and just to one side, a large screen television with a VCR.

"Awesome," I breathed. The rear wall was so impossibly far away, I couldn't believe this was the same building I'd seen earlier.

"Yes," he said softly. "It is that."

I walked around the perimeter, reading names off the spines of the books. Titles I'd never heard of, thousands of them, but many of the authors were familiar, even favorites—J.G. Ballard, Carson McCullers, Ibsen, Eliot, and Faulkner, novels, short stories, essays, plays, and poetry. After a few minutes, I realized I

had not yet seen a single title that I'd read, and the sheer volume overwhelmed me.

"Feel free to borrow anything you'd like to read. Just be sure to return everything when you're done. Most of these are very rare editions."

Rarer even than I imagined. I passed *When You Care, When You Love* by Theodore Sturgeon, *Whispers of War* by Ernest Hemingway, and a set of plays by Shakespeare that included *Love's Labour Regained* and *Simon of Syracuse*. While I browsed, Uncle Dan touched a switch on the wall and an unfamiliar orchestral piece reverberated through the room, one which I later learned was Beethoven's Tenth Symphony. Several times I reached out to select a volume, *The Compleat and Wondrous Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* by Edgar Allen Poe, *The Hampshire Horror* by Saki, or Jules Verne's *The Wonderful Journey to Mars*, but each time my fingers hovered, then moved to another shelf.

"You'll be here all summer, you know," Uncle Dan said softly, and with a note of quiet amusement. And sympathy as well; I could sense it distinctly. We'd only been together a few hours, but there was already a resonance between us that was beyond anything my eleven-year-old mind could reduce to words. "There's plenty of time."

He was standing beside a convoluted piece of sculpture that reminded me of a Mobius strip, something called *Internal and External Forms* by Henry Moore. The first version, he told me several days later, when I asked about it. Moore was dissatisfied and had it destroyed, then started over from scratch.

"If it was destroyed, how did it get here?" I asked. Uncle Dan just smiled mysteriously, his usual response to questions he didn't care to answer.

You might imagine that we had little in common, an aging bachelor and a precocious youngster. He spent the mornings writing in his study, using an old-fashioned manual typewriter whose keys were so worn that the finished copy invariably looked

smudged no matter how carefully he handled it. I spent that time reading, and around noon we'd have a light lunch, then talk for a while, usually in the library.

"Did you buy all of this?" According to my mother, Uncle Dan just barely scraped by financially.

"No, John. None of what you see could be bought or sold. It's beyond value."

"Then where did it all come from?" I flushed, afraid I was being impertinent.

He was silent a moment before answering, and I had a sense that I was about to share in a great secret. "Art is alive, John, and like any other living thing drawn to those who truly welcome it."

Sometimes we played chess using a set sculpted by Max Ernst, sitting in front of a panorama from Paul Klee's *Scenes from the Botanical Gardens*. Although paintings had never previously interested me, I soon learned to distinguish between Leger and Braques, developed respect for the subtlety of Seurat, and puzzled over the emotions in Edvard Munch's woodcuts.

At other times we watched classic films, like Lon Chaney's 1927 silent horror movie, *London After Midnight*. That one I'd heard of at least, although I didn't know any copies had survived. But there were others whose titles and casts amazed me, with stars like Bogart and Karloff and Garbo and Fay Wray.

"If you didn't buy any of this, where did it all come from?" I asked once, after we'd just finished viewing a 1931 version of *Frankenstein* with Bela Lugosi playing the monster.

"Here and there." Uncle Dan was always vague when I questioned him about the source of his collection.

"But shouldn't they be in a museum or some place where they couldn't burn up in a fire or something?"

Uncle Dan was silent a moment before answering. "Art is immortal, John. It has an existence independent of the physical world. Once a work has been imagined, it can never be

destroyed, even if the artist fails to transform thought into action. What has been conceived, is."

The summer sped past, Mom came home, and before I knew it I was being bundled onto the bus at the Tutford depot.

"You'll have to come back and visit sometime. There are lots of things you haven't read yet, things that deserve to be read by someone who appreciates them." It must have been the light, but it looked as though my uncle's eyes were glittering in the pale light.

"I will," I promised. It was only one of many promises I never kept.

Mom was transferred to California and we moved during the Christmas holiday. I wrote to Uncle Dan a few times, but the letters kept getting shorter until they would have fit on postcards. He responded to each with long, thoughtful discussions of everything I'd said, but adolescence sneaked up on me when I wasn't looking and while I never lost my fascination for reading, the greater obsession of sex pre-empted it for several years. By the time of my marriage, my only communication with Uncle Dan was a terse note scribbled inside a Christmas card once a year. By the time of my divorce, I wasn't writing to anyone. Not that I blamed Lisa; she was so emotionally committed to motherhood, she just couldn't accept that I was infertile. That wasn't the only problem, of course, but it was the core, and our attempts to deal with the fringe issues only exacerbated the failure of our relationship.

A year later, my mother and Uncle Dan both died within the space of three months, Mom from undiagnosed cancer, Uncle Dan from an unspecified heart condition.

It was a complete surprise to me to discover that I was his sole heir. The deep sense of loss was even more of a shock. Although Uncle Dan had diminished to an abstraction, the realization that he was gone forever penetrated the armor of indifference I'd worn since the divorce. I am not embarrassed to say that I cried as much upon learning of his

death as I did when my mother passed away.

After several lengthy telephone conversations with the lawyers in Tutford, I decided to fly back east and close out Uncle Dan's affairs personally. That night, I woke in the hours just preceding dawn, realizing that there was nothing to keep me on the West Coast any longer. Lisa and I were quits, Mom was dead and buried, and the job I was holding at Lewis Aerotech was boring and a professional dead end.

I handed in my resignation later that day and arranged for the proceeds from my profit-sharing to be mailed to me at the Connecticut address.

If I had any concrete plans for my life when I boarded the plane for the flight east, they were a secret even from me. I had some vague idea of selling off part or all of my uncle's property in order to support myself while I looked for a new job, but frankly I wasn't certain what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. In Tutford, when I realized that as literary executor of my uncle's estate I would be able to live modestly on that income, it was a revelation that verged on the religious.

In my uncle's study, I learned that he had inherited the property himself, forty years earlier, from a woman named Claiborne. Pamela Claiborne had eked out a precarious living writing advertising jingles while trying unsuccessfully to interest someone in the elaborate symphonies she had composed. The name was familiar, however, and when I checked the library, I found several recordings of her work.

I moved into the farmhouse and decided to see if the novels and stories I had bottled up inside could be coaxed forth. I used my uncle's aging, manual typewriter, and the manuscripts always looked smudged no matter how careful I was.

The years passed with surprising swiftness. Every so often, a new title would appear on a shelf, or a new painting on some previously vacant section of wall. I never saw

how they arrived, and surprisingly enough, lost any interest in that knowledge very early. Suffice it to say, the collection continued to provide a haven for those works which deserved to be included.

I sold a few stories during the next decade, but to no great critical or reader acclaim. After four years, *Dangerous Dreams* was completed and started making the rounds of publishing houses. Sometimes the rejections which followed were brusque: "Not suited to our program." Sometimes they were sympathetic: "Fascinating but not commercially viable." Rejection followed rejection, fourteen in all over the course of the next decade.

I celebrated my forty-fifth birthday today by sitting and rereading the only novel I have ever completed. It was returned a week ago, with deep regrets and considerable admiration according to the editor at Proscenium Press. "In another time, I'd be proud to publish this fine work, but contemporary tastes being what they are...." There are still places I could send it, both commercial and university publishing houses. But I won't. I know now that it will remain unpublished.

I was walking in the library first thing this morning, searching for something to read, and my eyes trailed past *Three More Lives* by Gertrude Stein, *Potpourri Planet* by Stanley Weinbaum, and *The Teapot Testament* by Charles Dickens. And there, in among the books I'd set aside to read, was *Dangerous Dreams* by John Cosgrove.

I am content that the child of my imagination has been judged and accepted by whatever profound powers decide these things. When the time comes for me to pass the custodianship on to my successor, whoever he or she might be, I hope that it will at last find an appreciative audience.

I moved it to another shelf, though, and now it sits next to *Wavering Images*, the collection of poems Uncle Dan had just started to write when he passed away.

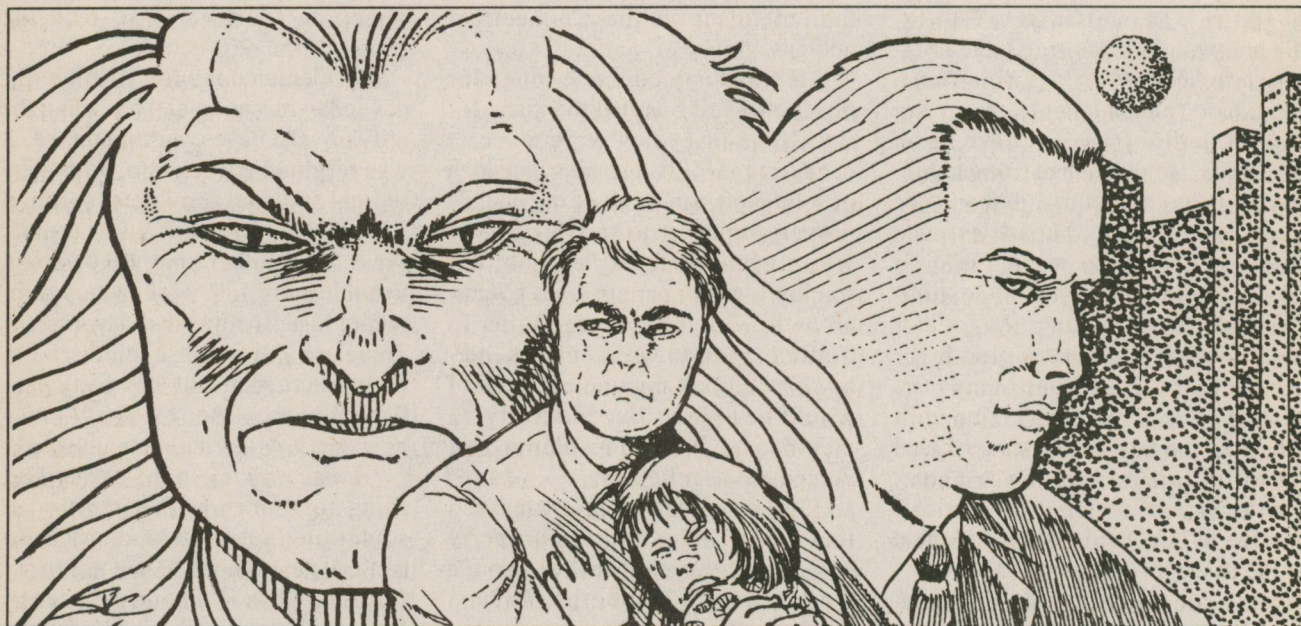
We are best judged by the company we keep. ■

A JOB FOR A PROFESSIONAL

John Moore

Illustrated by Susan Van Camp

The job called for a Professional.



The room was crowded. Hot, damp, and smoky. It was six o'clock and the blue collar crowd was draining the evening's second beer. Jameson had to push his way to the bar. Dynamite saw him and came right over. He put a glass of beer in front of Jameson, the foam running wetly down the sides, and said, "It's all set up, Mr. Jameson. Just go on back."

Jameson looked around and pulled nervously on his raincoat. "Now?"

"Best time for it, man. Nobody sees you in a crowd."

"Okay." Jameson slid a twenty across the bar. He left the beer on the counter and made his way to the back of the room, to a door that said,

"Employees Only." On the other side of the door was a storeroom. Cases of whiskey lined the walls, and crates of beer in brown bottles were stacked waist-high. A sixty-watt bulb with a green metal shade hung from the ceiling. Under the bulb sat a man. He wasn't what Jameson expected.

"C'mon, c'mon, sit down, sit down." Fat, with black curly hair, black curly beard, and smiling dark eyes. He looked like an Italian Santa Claus. "You're Jameson, right? Sit down. Jeez, what a night. Raining like hell, huh." He had the Newark Italian accent, not an accent really, just the choppy sentences and heavily emphasized syllables. "Come on, come on, tell me about it."

"You're Al?" said Jameson. He still couldn't believe it.

"Yeah, Al. Call me Al. What, you were expecting Bobby De Niro?"

"I guess."

"Hey, don't worry about it. You're talking to a couple of professionals, Mr. Jameson. You got a problem, Tony and me, we can take care of it. Now what's the deal with this Dr. Vasilov?"

Jameson's mouth tightened. "There's no deal about it. His name's Vasilov and I want him...." He hesitated. "Killed."

Al shook his head. "No, no. Jameson, Jameson." He grabbed Jameson's shoulder and looked into his eyes. "Jameson, we're profes-

sionals. We're here to help you. But to help you, we got hear about your problem. Otherwise, how do we know we're hitting the right guy? Maybe you're not looking at it right, we hit the wrong guy, three months from now, you come back, you want another guy hit. Maybe killing isn't the answer to your problem at all, you thought of that? Come on, talk to me."

"He's after my daughter." The words came out in one relieved breath and Jameson realized how much he wanted someone to tell him he was doing the right thing.

A man came in the back door, bigger than Al, with thick arms and heavy shoulders. He was carrying a plastic bag. Al said, "Tony, this is Jameson." Tony shook hands and sat down gravely. He shook the water off the plastic bag and took out a box and a plastic bubble package. The label on the box identified it as Polaroid film. The plastic bubble held a flash bar. The label said "Daylight Blue."

Tony repeated, deep and slow. "He's after your daughter."

"She's eleven," said Jameson. "She's at the age where she's starting to do things with her friends. You know, go to movies, parties, stay the night. We can't watch her all the time."

"Of course not," said Al. Tony nodded.

"And he follows her. Two, maybe three nights a week. When she has band practice, he waits outside the school for her. She's scared. He's a scary-looking guy. Her friends are scared too. They don't want to walk with her. She's having nightmares."

"This guy done anything to her?"

"No. If he had, I'd be at the police instead of here. But I don't like what's happening. He used to hang back about a block. Now he walks up right behind her. Last week she was so scared she ran the last three blocks home and this guy was running too, right behind her."

"You said anything to him?"

"I told him to back off," said Jameson. "He just kind of sneered at

me. Then we went out for pizza and he followed us in his car, the whole family. He works at the medical clinic. It's only about a mile from our place. Also..."

Jameson hesitated, wondering if he should tell them about the last part. He didn't want them to think he was crazy. "Also he looks into her bedroom window."

"Jesus Christ," said Al, and Tony muttered, "Bastard."

"He's gone before I can catch him."

"Sounds like this guy is trouble waiting to happen," said Al. "Okay, we'll take care of him tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Sure. You brought the money, didn't you? Then we'll just go ahead. We wait, you think it over, you lose your nerve."

Jameson took the money from his coat pockets and handed it over, two thick stacks of twenties, and a thinner one. Tony was loading the film into a Polaroid camera. Jameson knew what *that* was for. They took a picture of the body to prove they did the hit. Tony snapped on the flash bar and looked up.

"You're doing the right thing, Mr. Jameson. These perverts, a lot of the time they just want to look. But if he tries to do something to her, a kid that age, it's gonna cause a lot of psychological damage, even if he doesn't hurt her. Better to stop it now."

"Your problem is over," promised Al.

Jameson stopped at an auto parts store and bought windshield wiper blades, so he could tell Janice why he was late getting home to the apartment. Alison was watching a Cosby show rerun. She sat cross-legged in front of the television, troubled and quiet, and didn't laugh at all, even though this was a pretty funny episode. Over the past few months she had gotten quieter and more somber. But when she kissed him good night she gave him a smile that was like one of the old smiles and he felt relieved. "She'll be okay once this is over," he told himself

and hugged her tightly, knowing that tomorrow would be like a new beginning for them. Alison went to bed and he and Janice watched the news. He wished they hadn't. It seemed like every day there was a story about child molesters, or child abusers, or child pornographers. Or missing children, or battered children. It didn't seem like there could be any kids left in the United States. He felt Janice grow stiff and rigid in his arms. Since they had gone to the police, and been told that nothing could be done, that no crime had been committed *yet*, she had gotten a lot quieter too. He switched off the television. And then he heard Alison scream.

He was down the hall in an instant and when he kicked open her door she was sitting up in bed, crying, "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" and pointing to the window. He pushed back the curtains and stared impotently into the darkness. "I saw him, Daddy. He was trying to get in." Behind him Janice wrapped her arms around the girl.

"Hush, baby. There's no one there. It was just a bad dream."

But Jameson knew it wasn't a dream. He had seen it too, the stark white face, the staring red eyes, a chilling glimpse before it vanished in the blackness. He clenched his fists. Janice went on soothingly, "It's all right now. No one was looking through your window. We're on the fourteenth floor."

They picked him up the next morning. Four men in Armani suits, Gucci loafers, Ivy League ties, a Lincoln with blacked-out windows. Expensive, sharp, very professional. Very unfriendly. They took him to an office building in the business section, up the service elevator, to a room that held a single chair. And they questioned him for three hours. They were angry about something. He didn't know what. Jameson was frightened. He told them everything he knew, rapidly, completely and honestly, and they only hit him five times. Finally they stopped asking questions and showed him the pictures.

"Oh, my God," said Jameson. He nearly vomited. Al's cheerful, bearded face was a bloody mess, the nose mashed flat against one cheek, only torn flaps of ears remaining, the throat ripped completely out. Big Tony stared reproachfully out of the photo, strands of tendon connecting the head with the body. "I didn't know. I swear I didn't know. I wasn't expecting anything like this."

"Yeah," one of them said, and another said, "Clean him up. Get him a fresh shirt. The Don wants to see him."

The office they brought him to had a wide oak door with carved panels. He stood in front of it, two men on either side, and they brought Dynamite out. Beads of sweat hung under his eyes. He had time to say, "Sorry, man. I had to tell them," before they pushed Jameson through.

The Don sat behind an oak desk the size of a Buick. He was older than Al or Tony had been, with gray hair and a gray silk shirt. A four-carat diamond gleamed on his pinkie. His mouth was creased down in a permanent frown. When he saw Jameson he frowned even more. In back of him an antique sideboard held a gleaming new espresso machine. Perched on the edge of the desk was a good-looking young man in a jacket of tan Cabretta leather. He gave Jameson a reassuring smile. Jameson was not reassured. Standing beside him was the oldest woman Jameson had ever seen.

There was an expectant silence. Then the woman started to hobble forward. She moved with agonizing slowness; she would take a step, pause as if to get her breath, then take another small step. No one said a word. The four wise guys flanking Jameson stood very still, eyes flicking around the room, trying not to look at the old woman making her painful way across the carpet. She ignored them, eventually reaching Jameson and taking his wrist in a hand blue with veins. She said something in Italian.

Jameson said, "Uh..."

She cackled and looked up at him. Her eyes were cloudy with

cataracts and he realized she was either blind or damn close to it. She said, in a voice that screeched like an iron hinge, "She calls to him."

"What?"

"The little girl. She calls to him, you see. In her dreams. He cannot resist."

Jameson jerked his hand away. "You're crazy."

The wise guys sucked in their breath and edged a step away. Jameson suddenly regretted speaking.

The woman cackled again. She put a hand on Jameson's chest. The fingers burned like brands. "He is a good man, this one." She spoke to the Don in Italian again.

"All right," said the man. He looked at Jameson severely. "Al was my nephew. He was good people. You should have told him that he would be dealing with a *cosa morte*."

"I, uh, didn't know."

"This is a family thing now. *La vendetta*." The Don tapped his ring reflectively against the desk. "You go with Frank now, you do what he tells you. You don't make trouble for us again."

"Okay," said Jameson.

"Take Son of Sam, for instance," said Frank. He was the guy in the leather jacket. He had come in from Italy on the Concord that morning. "He told the police right out. His neighbor's dog told him to do it. The dog was possessed by a demon. So the police lock him up, sure, that's okay, but what do they do about the dog? Nothing! Dumb fucks. You can't trust the police with things like this. Me, I'd have taken out every dog for six blocks around, just to be safe."

Jameson remembered Son of Sam. For months he stalked New York, killing teenage girls with long brown hair. The police were baffled. Then he killed a girl in Dyker Heights, the upper class Mafia enclave. Four days later he was caught.

Frank was still talking. "First job I had in America, you couldn't eat in a restaurant. They cooked the

macaroni ahead of time, let it sit on the stove all day. Now everybody uses fresh pasta, cooks it to order, it's almost worthwhile."

"This is crazy," said Jameson.

"No, wait till you try it."

"I mean this vampire thing."

"You told me you saw him at the window. What'd he use, a jet pack?"

Jameson looked out the window. It was a bright, clear, and warm. Last night's horrors seemed terribly far away. "I must have imagined it."

"You didn't imagine nothing. Hey, even in America the church still keeps exorcists on call. You think they do it for nostalgia? And how about that voodoo shit around New Orleans? That ain't special effects."

"And you go around Europe killing vampires?"

Frank waggled a hand. "France, Italy. I do a lot of jobs in Mexico too. It's a cyclical thing. It'll be quiet for six or eight years and then it will break out. Like rabies." He put a nylon gym bag on the table and took out a camera, which he pushed across the table to Jameson. Jameson recognized it.

"This is Tony's camera."

"Yeah. I cleaned the blood off, though." Frank took a .357 Magnum out of the bag and laid it on the table. Then he took out a handful of shells. Jameson looked at them incredulously. "Wooden bullets?"

"Wooden bullets. The Japanese used them in World War Two. Banned by the Geneva convention. Terrible stuff. They shatter on impact and riddle the target with splinters."

"Is that why you use them?"

"No." Frank checked the gun and began loading it. "Don't try and figure this out with logic. It's a supernatural thing. A piece of wood through the heart. It's the only thing that will work. That's just the way it is."

"That's it," said Jameson. "I've had enough. You're absolutely insane. I'm getting out of here." He stalked over to the door. Frank made no move to stop him. He put a hand

on the knob and turned it. Behind him he heard a quiet, understated "click." Jameson froze.

"Sit down," Frank said in a not-so-pleasant voice. The .357 loomed large in his hand. Jameson walked stiff-legged back to the table. "Now listen. I don't want to fuck around here. I got a job to do and you're gonna help me do it. You got a daughter to protect and you need me to do it. Understand?"

Jameson's mouth was dry. He said, "Yeah."

"When Al and Tony made their move, this Vasilov guy knew someone was on to him. So he wants to pack up and leave. Start again somewhere else. That's what these guys do. But he can't. Because of the girl."

"Alison?"

Frank nodded.

"But why Alison?"

"There's a certain kind of girl they go for. A certain kind of purity. Sweetness, innocence, something like that. Like the *strega* said. She calls to him. She's the flame and he's the moth. He can't get away from her. That's why so many *nosferati* are going to Mexico City these days. All those good little Catholic girls."

"Oh, Jesus Christ," said Jameson. "Oh, Alison."

"Yeah, this guy Vasilov was probably cruising along very nicely at that clinic, working the night shift, skimming a few blood bags, maybe helping along the occasional terminal patient, until your daughter lit him up. He can't leave till he kills her. Unless he takes her with him. Which means killing you and your wife."

Jameson stuck out his jaw. "He's not getting Alison. He's not getting Janice either. I don't care about myself."

"That's good," said Frank. He put the gun back down. "Because here's what you're going to do."

Jameson sat in a booth at the back of the diner, playing with a cup of coffee. It had been two hours since he had called Vasilov at the hospital.

He tried to look out the window but the bright lights inside and the darkness outside combined to show him only his own haggard reflection. Part of him was afraid the doctor wouldn't show up. Part of him was afraid he would.

"It'll be empty," Frank had said. "The guy who runs it owes us a favor."

"But won't he suspect a setup?"

"Sure he'll know it's a setup. So what? He'd rather meet you there than meet you in your own home. Hell, he's got occult powers. He took on two pros this morning. You think he's afraid of you?"

It had sounded very convincing and not at all reassuring. Now Jameson shivered. His feet felt like ice and the camera in his pocket weighed a ton. Across the formica the counterman had been polishing the same glass for forty minutes. Jameson took a sip of the coffee. It was cold.

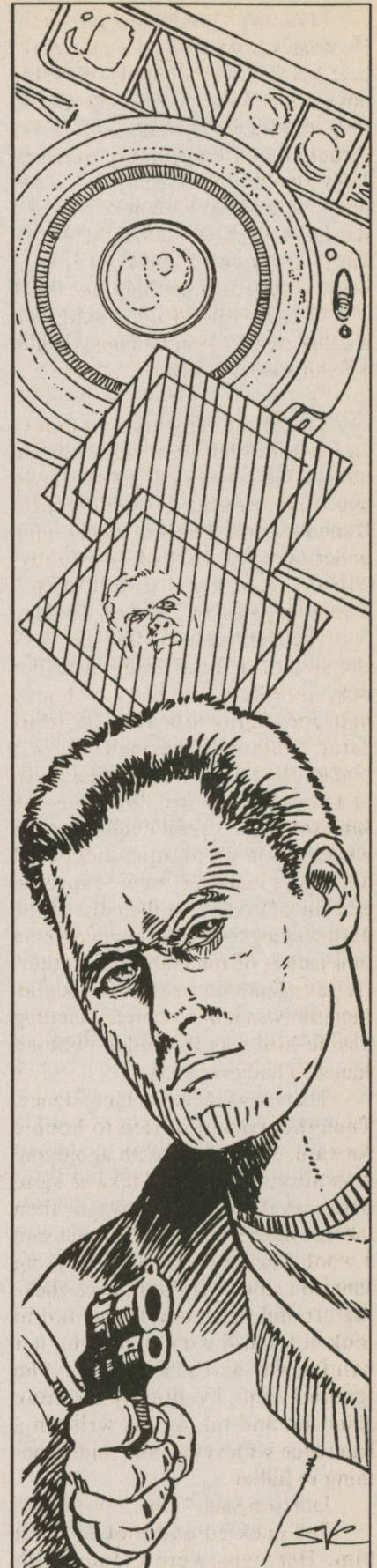
Vasilov stepped inside.

Gone were the glaring red eyes and anoxic skin Jameson remembered from the window. He looked calm and ordinary and quiet and harmless. He wore a navy blue suit much like Jameson's. A touch of gray showed at his temples and his hair was thinning on top. He looked at Jameson without speaking, then he looked around the diner. Carefully and deliberately, he stepped around the counter and looked behind it. The counterman quietly left through the front door, leaving the keys in it. Vasilov locked it. He looked in the men's room, then the women's. When he was satisfied that the diner was empty he took a seat across the table from Jameson.

"I don't believe we've met," he said formally.

Jameson found a hidden reserve of anger to combat his fear. "Cut the crap," he snapped. "I know who you are and you know who I am. I want you to keep away from my daughter. This is your last warning."

"Ah," said Vasilov. His voice was cool and smooth. "And your two friends. Were they sent to give me your next to last warning?"



Jameson gritted his teeth. "Something like that."

"I see." Vasilov put his hands flat on the table. The nails were long and carefully manicured. "Mr. Jameson, why don't you give Alison to me?"

This was so totally unexpected it left Jameson speechless. "I wish to marry her," explained Vasilov. "I assure you I can care for her quite well and she will enjoy a rich, rewarding life." He paused and smiled thinly. "And a very long one."

"But," said Jameson weakly, "She's only eleven."

"She is almost twelve, but that is immaterial. There are still many countries where child brides are legal, and modern jetliners put them only half a day away. You and your wife are still young enough to have more children. I can give you a talisman that will insure no member of your family will ever be bothered again."

"You're insane," said Jameson.

Vasilov's nails seemed to grow longer. A hint of red appeared in his eyes. "Consider, Mr. Jameson," he said hoarsely, "the alternative." Then came the explosion.

A .357 Magnum packs a lot of wallop, especially when fired from point-blank range. The shatterpoint bullet took out the entire window in a rain of glass spicules and still had enough punch to knock Vasilov out of the booth. He landed on the floor in a sitting position, spinning round, looking at the booth in stunned astonishment. Outside Frank calmly leaned in the window, rested his elbows on the table, and put three more shots in quick succession into Vasilov's chest, each shot jolting him back along the polished linoleum until he was leaning motionless against the counter, staring at them with blank, dead eyes.

"And that's that," said Frank. "Get a picture for the Don and let's get out of here."

Jameson took out the camera. Vasilov got up.

"Shit!" Frank just had time to say. "He's wearing a vest." And then Vasilov flew at him.

He flew, really flew, just above tabletop level, crossing the space between them in a split second; he grabbed Frank's arm and squeezed. Jameson heard the bones crunch, the gun dropped onto the table, and Vasilov yanked Frank through the window and hurled him with one hand against the counter twelve feet away. Frank's head hit the counter with a sickening thud, he lay unconscious, and Vasilov picked him up, smiled, and carefully broke his neck.

Then he turned and launched himself towards Jameson. There was no mistake this time. Eyes glowed blood red, jagged teeth showed between bloodless lips, and black nails curved like claws. He came like the demon of every nightmare ever dreamed and Jameson, cringing back in the booth, convulsively snapped the shutter on the camera.

The flash went off and Vasilov dropped to the floor.

The reprieve was short lived. Vasilov got up, holding one arm over his eyes. He shook himself like a wet dog, and then lowered his arm and glared at Jameson with malevolent eyes. Then he came again.

Thinking of the only thing he could do, Jameson snapped the camera. Vasilov collapsed. Jameson looked at the camera in his shaking hands, two flashes used, two more to go, and a memory came back, last night in the bar, Big Tony loading the camera and the words on the package, "DAYLIGHT BLUE." Vasilov got up again. There were blisters on his face and his eyes were fixed on Jameson; he reached for him and got another face full of daylight and fell backwards. Jameson looked at the window, with the jagged shards remaining in its frame, and knew he had to get out of there, crawl through the window and run like hell, but he couldn't move. He looked inside and Vasilov was getting up. One flash left.

Behind Vasilov, Frank blinked.

The hit man was lying on his back, on the floor against the counter, his head canted at an unnatural angle. There was blood coming out of his ears. But his eyes moved

in his head and he looked right at the gun, still lying on the table, and Jameson knew what to do. Vasilov took a step forward. Frank looked at Jameson and blinked again. Jameson set off the last flash. And Vasilov screamed.

It was the scream of an animal caught in a trap. The vampire's knees buckled under him in the glare of photoflash daylight and Jameson seized the gun and jumped on him, hitting twice in the face with the barrel. Vasilov's head rolled back, and Jameson tore his shirt open. Underneath, the Kevlar vest was held on with Velcro straps.

The lower straps ripped right off, and he had his fingers on the upper straps when Vasilov's hands locked around his wrists. The vampire was recovering fast. Jameson jerked backward with all his strength, exposing a chest covered with coarse black hair. Vasilov let his wrists go and reached for his throat with clawlike hands, rolling over and pinning Jameson to the floor. Nails dug into his jugular. "Now!" Jameson screamed to himself. He got the gun between them and squeezed the trigger. The Magnum jumped in his hand. Black blood came out of Vasilov's chest and mouth. He rolled off Jameson and sprawled face up on the floor. Behind him Frank twitched and lay still. Neither of them moved again.

Jameson sat still until his breathing returned to normal. The ejected photos from the Polaroid lay on the floor. He tossed the gun down with them and climbed out the window. An elderly couple passed him on the sidewalk, glanced at him incuriously, and looked away. On his way home, he thought about going back and wiping his prints off the gun, then decided to forget it. The family would take care of everything. ■



WRITING, PART FIVE

Algis Budrys

Lonely profession, and the implications of that.

Your writing cannot be done by anybody else but you. Also, when you are not actually doing it, you are doing something other than writing.

That may not strike you as revelatory. But you would be surprised, I'm sure, how many writers are confused on these points. Many people who call themselves writers, for example, spend very little time doing writing. They are attending publishers' parties for themselves and other writers, they are attending professional and amateur conventions, they are writing letters of comment and reply to comment, they are on extended trips doing research, and so forth. Some of them are so busy doing this that they have *no* time to actually write.

(What is meant by "writing" in this context, of course is the writing of fiction; the creation, in one's head and hopefully in the reader's, of places and people that have never been.)

There is a possible difference between the person who has not yet made it and the person who has. The person who has not yet made it tends to spend a fair amount of time writing or seriously preparing to write. The person who has made it may not.

This is because the would-be writer may not in fact want to be a writer; rather, he or she wants to go to parties and be *recognized* as a writer. This person has seen films and read books in which writing is a recognized glamor profession, and this person wants a slice of that. And so, once this person has sold a piece or two—whatever that person decides is the equivalent of making it—he or she spends a great deal of time at something other than writing...the more wrapped in glitter, the better. The glitter does not, on close inspec-

tion, prove to be very genuine, but the person who seeks it will probably not be discouraged by that, reasoning that tomorrow's party, or the next town, *will* contain the genuine article. A genuinely idealistic and optimistic member of this group will never give up searching.

A fair number of variously good writers do this; write just enough to keep their reputations alive, and meanwhile for instance serve in a bewildering number of writers' organizations in a number of capacities, and are sure to show up at cocktail parties besides. A number of them find work as essayists, literary agents and editors; anything to preserve the feel and appearance of writing. But they do not, in fact, write very much.

I don't know whether this is bad or good, and I only have theories as to why it is. But *real* writers don't do it. That very rare person, the real writer, in effect just writes. When they're not actually writing, they're resting from writing, and they get back to it as soon as they can.

Which means they are always prepared to take on the responsibility for being a writer. Not the blame or fame, not the glamor or the adverse criticism—the *responsibility*—which means the isolation from everything and everybody immediately real, in order to create reality. To these people, writing is not only a lonely profession, it is an aggressively lonely profession. It is, specifically, a profession whose practitioner says to spouse, offspring, garbage man and bill collector: "Not now. Later."

It is, I suppose, an arrogant view. It says that no one but the given writer is capable of creating these particular realities, and it says that creating these realities is the most important thing that could be done.

Well, that may very well be genuine arrogance, though I doubt it. More likely, the world, which assigns different priorities to spouse, offspring and bill collectors, is simply not gaited to accept the writer for what she or he is. That is, the writer and the immediate world will always have difficulty, which is probably just as well; we can't make exceptions in the world's standardized bill- and garbage-collection procedures, can we. Nor should we, or writers would be creating skewed realities.

The point to be made here is that you should probably take a long, and very close, look at yourself now, and genuinely decide whether you want to be a writer or to write as the enabling device for something else.

If you want to be a *writer*, realize that you will not be able to, and possibly won't want to, socialize with many other writers...or editors or publishers. Those people have very little important to say to you, and a great deal that is not so. You will choose your friends from other fields, having once heard a writer babble about something no doubt important to him, a publisher say that he is going to make you the next Stephen King, and an editor say that your next novel has to be a fantasy trilogy. This is—you will find this hard to credit for the next few years, but trust me—bullshit. You are a lonely, and a proud and rare, individual. You are a *writer*, and in your head are realities undreamed of by anyone else, and when you walk into a room, everyone else should fall silent, and listen.

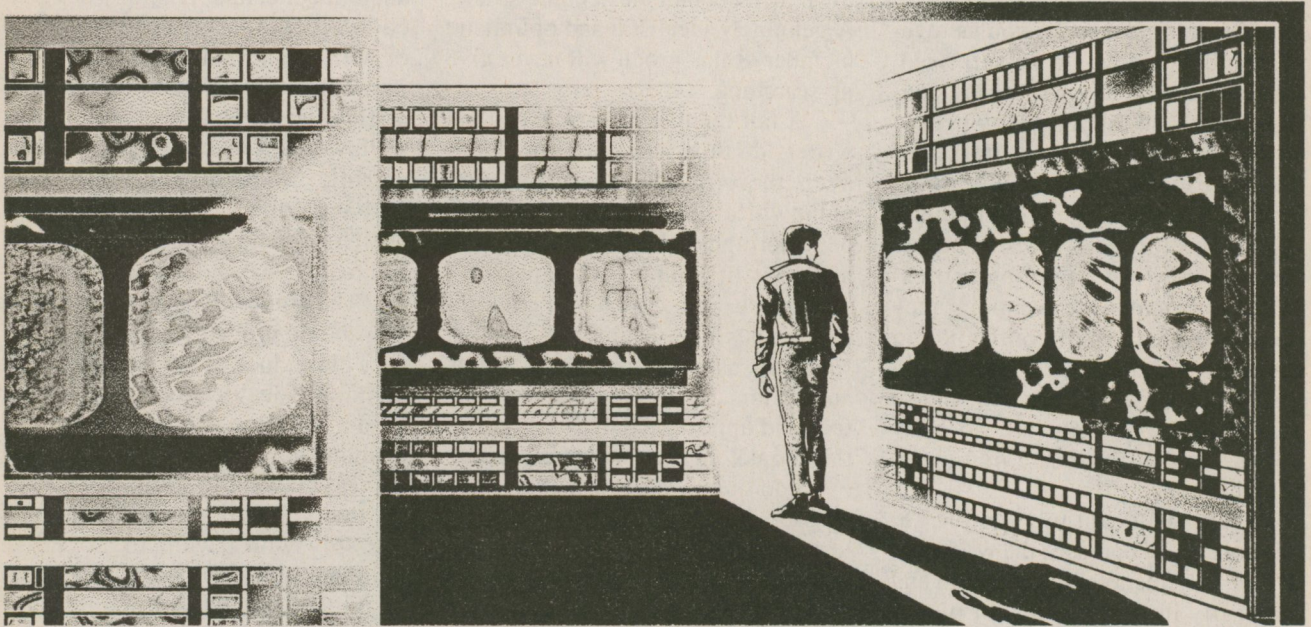
Well, that is probably why there are so few writers. Whereas there is a pretty good supply of the rest of us. Next time, we will take up various odd scraps of information. ■

MACHINES

David C. Hodgkins

Illustrated by Kandis Elliot

He was in a strange universe. How strange, he could not guess.



Things had not quite gone as planned. Lackland's left hip, and to a certain extent his left leg, hurt as if they were touched by fire. In other words, the network of fine silver wires, buried under his skin, was not perfect. But there was nothing he could do about it and complete his mission. Lackland dragged the leg after him.

As far as he could tell, there was something that was going as anticipated, though they could not account for it. Because there was nothing living. Not in the installation, not in the whole world. He looked around, not for the first time, and as far as he could see there were corridors full of machinery, marching on for miles in every direction. There was nothing else.

The machinery was interesting. It consisted mainly of computers, a

bit—say, fifty years—obsolete by his standards, but presumably perfectly serviceable. But all the switches were on Idle; that is, the monitors were dead. Also, what little writing there was, was not in any language he knew. The brand logos were unfamiliar, the writing was a little like Arabic but not enough, the occasional longer bit of writing was the same, though not as stylized(?). But it was proof, or at least an indication, that this culture was not (had not been?) too different from his. Surely they could eventually figure out what use this was (had been). But he did not dare touch the computers.

"Lackland," came over his internal sensors. It was, of course, Margit's voice. "What's happening, Lackland?"

"Nothing," he replied, dragging his leg behind him. "It's the same as

we got on the scanners; a big building full of computers, and as far as I can tell, they're just idling. No life. The lights are on, but we knew that, too."

"Have you learned anything new?"

"Not yet. I've moved around, and taken a 360-degree look every once in a while, but there's nothing new. The building just goes on."

"And how are you?"

Not bad, he thought—she'd done better than he'd thought she would, asking about him before too long. "Not bad," he said. "Left hip's none too good, but other than that the network's working pretty well."

"What does that mean?" she asked sharply.

"I think the left hip's a little out of sync. The network probably doesn't have its wires spaced properly. Don't worry about it."

"I'll decide what I'll worry about. I may want you to abort the mission."

"It's a pain, not paralysis. I want to at least go down a few more corridors before I come home." He began to move in an arbitrary direction; they were all exactly the same.

"Lackland!"

"Don't worry, Margit," he soothed.

It had begun a year ago; McCalester—Hugo McCalester, PhD several times over—had simply been running a sophisticated but fully understood program when suddenly he straightened in his lab chair and said "My God, look, you two!" and his computer screen showed a landscape of cities and towns, farms and villages, and a sky with three moons, and an ocean, and it was at that point that Margit said: "Where's the life?"

What McCalester's instruments were showing them was a complete civilization... somewhere. No one knew where it was, except that it was not any distance; rather, it was a slight difference in the vibratory rate of the fundamental particle, and that difference was enough to plunge McCalester's scanner into another universe. Except it had no life.

They searched. They found that in this universe, tantalizingly like their own, tantalizingly different, things appeared to be for the most part about a hundred years behind theirs in technological development. Cars, or something very much like cars, but all parked, for instance ran on what appeared to be gasoline, if the regularly spaced stations were actually anything like those on Earth, rather than having just a superficial resemblance. It was not a one-for-one correlation, however. There was nothing that they could identify as a movie theater, for instance, no matter how they searched. They did not search for movie theaters, of course; rather, they searched for life. But they noticed the absence of movies, as they saw that there was no life anywhere. Not true abandonment, however, or abandonment very recent—no lawns yet gone to seed,

no boats adrift, no shutters banging in the wind. At least moving back and forth—McCalester's scanner had no sound. And no corpses of anything; not mice or mouselike things, not horses, not people or people-like things. No corpses. And no life.

They had not known what to do with this data. They were three researchers—McCalester and two assistants, to be more accurate—and while there was a lifetime of research, and more, just in what they had seen, the idea of living a lifetime without learning what had happened to the life was more than they could contemplate.

It was Margit who thought of the network. And Margit, to be fair, who spent months soldering the silver wires, bent over the sterile workbench in her uncomfortable isolation clothes, squinting through the plastic faceplate as she, with almost inhuman patience, built the network bit by bit. But Margit was qualified to be McCalester's assistant because she was, among other things, almost inhumanly patient.

It was McCalester who, while this work proceeded, worked on Lackland; building in the communicator, and the heart rate monitor, and the kidney and liver function telemeters, and the lung reader, among other things. It hurt. But Lackland was qualified to be McCalester's assistant because, among other things, he had a high threshold of pain. And McCalester was McCalester because, among other things, he didn't give a damn about other people's pain. And all this was necessary for the first trans-dimensional traveler, so there was no quarrel with that.

"There's no quarrel with it," Lackland said to Margit as they lay in bed on the night prior to the installation of the network. "But a great deal of me is mechanical now." Margit laughed. "And very nice, too," she murmured.

"I don't feel much anymore."

"You'd never guess it by me."

"Damn it, Margit!" Lackland said with amazing vehemence, "I'm

being whittled away, and I care about it!"

"I care about it too, Lackland," she said soberly. "I really do. But there's nothing we can do about it, is there? And you'll be soooo famous!"

"Yes. I'll be so famous." And he lay in the dark.

And the next day, he lay on the table and they dressed him head to toes in the network, working very carefully, so that it took hours. The network was incredibly fine; he barely knew it was on. And then they pulled, very, very carefully, at the finger- and toe-tips, and the top of his head, and the network sank out of sight into his flesh, leaving diamond lozenges of blood-droplets all over his body. (But they healed, of course), and the scars were perfectly invisible, except at the finger and toe-tips, where they snipped off the excess material and soldered the cut ends together, and performed micro-operations to bury them. And at his penis, of course. At the top of his head, they fed the leads into his power supply, which was buried in among his collar bones with a cable running up under his neck. And even so, he thought months later when he had healed, and went, and found himself dragging his leg around the installation, it was not perfect. But if Margit thought he was going to abort after all that, she did not know him as well as she claimed she did. Or, come to think of it, did she?

They had found the installation, finally. It was a huge building in the middle of the central continent. It was surrounded by motionless trains; hundreds of trains, many coaches long apiece, that had to have brought the people(?) here. Other trains with cages. Still others with constructions on them that might originally have housed anything. And there was no life. When they scanned inside the building, they found only computers. And it was at that point that they realized they would never have the patience to riddle things out; someone would have to go, and that someone was, of course, Lackland.

And he had smiled and volunteered, as a gesture to civility, though he knew that -the two of them would have brought enormous pressure to bear on him if he did not go; would, in the end, have killed him or at least fired him, and hired someone who would go.

And the going had been a relief, after the months of being prepared to go. They had simply placed the cathodes of a larger version of scanner around his body, and punched a button, and here he was, a little sick and disoriented at first, but that passed, and with somewhat of a tendency to gravitate toward walls, and stick lightly to them, but he quickly learned to compensate for that, and there were the computers, and there was no life. The grass had grown; there were boats adrift now, and shutters banging. And it made no difference. All he heard in here was the sound of his own clumsy footsteps.

"Lackland!"

"Yes, Margit."

"Have you found *anything*?"

He had not. That was reflected in his voice. "No." He stood at the intersection of two corridors, exactly like all the other intersections.

"McCalester thinks he understands why the people left. Their sun is showing signs of severe instability. He thinks it could go nova at any time."

"Considerate."

"What?"

"Considerate of them to take all of their ecosystem with them; bugs and pets, domestic and wild animals, all the birds and fishes—everything. And where did they go? How did they go?"

"We don't know everything, Lackland. But the sun *is* likely to go nova."

Lackland looked around him. "To say that we don't know everything is to understate. All right—I'll come back. Tomorrow's another day." And his hip was really bothering him. Suddenly he realized he was weary unto death. If tomorrow came on this world, he *would* be back. He'd have four or five minutes' warning if the sun did explode—he could trust McCalester to be scanning the sun at its surface, now that he'd become interested—and he only needed a split second. All the ambition and drive that had conspired to put him here had drained out of him in the course of exploring this enigmatic place. He toggled the return switch clipped to his belt, and felt the network and himself being thrown back into his time and place.

There was no one in the laboratory. His coat was smoking. He threw it off, and found that his hip had burned, slowly, cauterizing itself as it went, so that he had a deep wound an inch and a half across, black, beneath his trousers and through the muscle, so that he would never not feel pain again. He groped at his hip. He cried out softly. He found that his eyes were wet. He stood motionless for a few moments, gathering himself.

But finally he went out into the hall. The soles of his feet were tingling. He went into McCalester's space, and found McCalester and Margit sitting with a report near Margit's hand, and McCalester looking toward her, but they were sitting strangely, as though the seat cushions had mysteriously deepened. And they were sitting in tinges of blood. They were both dead, thank God—they were sinking deeper and deeper into the chairs, and the blood was com-

pletely disappearing too, and now McCalester, his thighs gone, toppled over, and in a moment so did Margit. They began to disappear from their foreheads as well, where they touched the surface of McCalester's table.

Lackland felt his feet begin to slide. He looked down, and he was being eaten.

The computers, he thought. The computer programs in the installation were designed to first of all attract any researchers like McCalester, and then to follow whatever came to visit.

Now he heard screams in other portions of the building. Other people were not as quick to catch on as McCalester and Margit had been, as he still was. Other people thought screaming would do some good. But it was too late. Too late for everyone in the world, as soon as the inhabitants of the micro-universe reproduced enough.

He pushed what remained of Margit's body out of the chair—she was so light, now—and sat down. When his feet went, he did not want to simply crumple.

He knew what was happening. Neither Margit nor he were much behind McCalester in intelligence. The one thing McCalester's scanner could not tell them, nor McCalester's projector, either, was the size of what it focussed on. And it turned out that the people of the other planet—of the other universe—were very small.

And considerate. Or else cowardly, and afraid to invade a new world without complete environmental support. Or both. What the hell. And unstoppable.

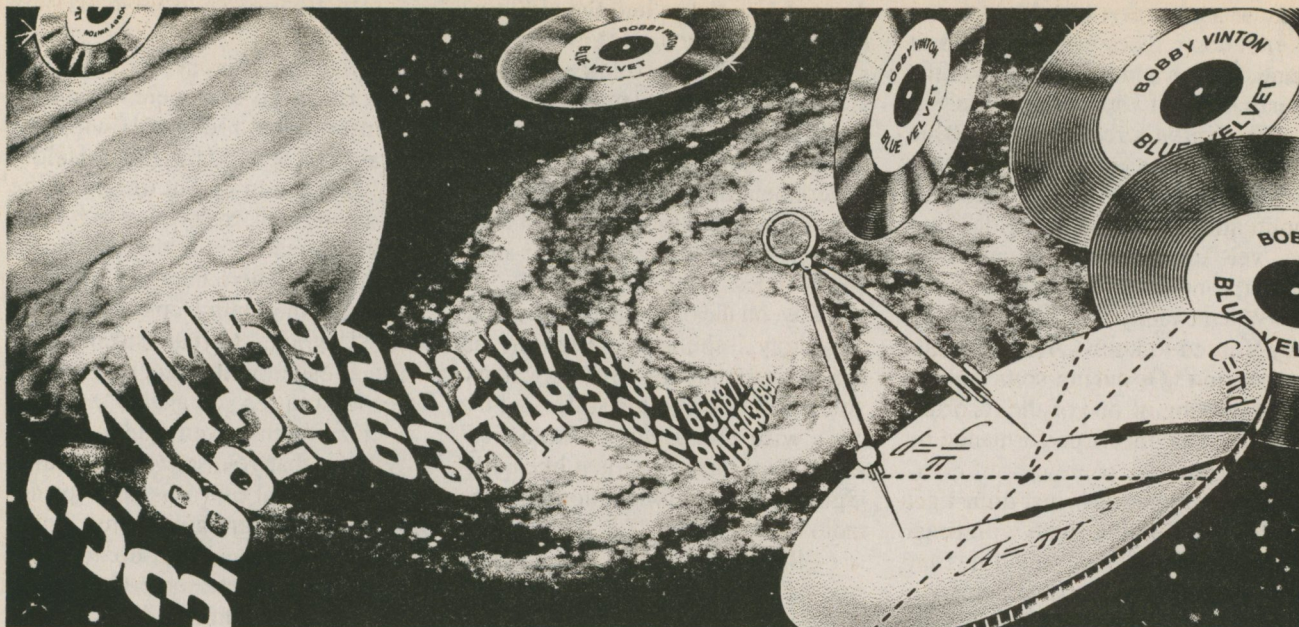
He felt them burrowing into his heart. He wondered what they would make of the network, and the other devices buried in his body. He died.■

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HERBRAND'S CONJECTURE AND THE WHITE SOX SCANDAL

Eliot Fintushel

Illustrated by Kandis Elliot

Pi was changing. But that wasn't all, by a long shot.

On July 27, 1931, the *Journal für die reine und angewandte Mathematik* received a submission, "Sur le non-contradiction de l'arithmétique," from Gottingen, from the mathematical logician Jacques Herbrand. The manuscript was dated 14 July 1931. It was ultimately published in the opening pages of No. 166 of the *Journal*. On the exact day that the manuscript was received by the *Journal*, Herbrand fell to his death in the French Alps. He was only 23 years old.

Also "on" the 27th, the following "message" was "transmitted": (Please indulge me in the use of quotation marks; the necessity for them will soon become apparent.)

Dear Xillk,

Don't worry about a thing. I hug you. I suck your tongue and smell with it, my only mind ape. The sentient beings here will never sense us. See what I see. Inform the minions to lap them up. These beings here will never be more than our thought contents. They cannot see us. They will never think us. Invite the Unlimited Ones, saying: "Graze in utter safety on the minds of the Mullers."

I am yours, Nimble One. I give myself to you, even unto being your thought content.

Beloved, thou who seest the insides of my eyelids, know that I

have entered the life stream of the best of the Mullers. I have entered it between their thoughts, so that even if a Muller should glimpse our presence, I will be there to inflame and expand him, to confer inward honors and presages of glory. They will name themselves seers and mystics and enlightened ones; no Muller can but be blinded by such a screen, for a Muller cannot both name and see. The Unlimited Ones will graze on them at their leisure.

Also, Herbrand is dead.

I await you. My work is done. No sweat.

Brkiss

He was not crazy. Izzy Molson was not crazy. They entered the Earth plane through a hidden passage in the fourth beat of the word "blue" in Bobby Vinton's recording of "Blue Velvet," at the exact point where Bobby's voice is at the top of the glissando and just before he slides into the "vel-" of the word "velvet." Izzy knew it for a dead certainty.

When exactly had this happened, they wanted to know. At the recording session? Or during some subsequent playing of one of the records? Or live, at a concert performance by Bobby Vinton?

Damn them, they just didn't get it. This had nothing to do with time, as we ordinarily understand it. Izzy had explained it a thousand times. An alien incursion of this magnitude occurs at all times, you might say, or at some times and all places, or at some places and all times.

"Think," Izzy would tell them. "Think, for the love of Pete, if you're capable of it. Think of a plane suddenly moving up to engulf a line parallel to it. On the line, these little 1-D dots are living. That's you and me, well, you anyway. The little dots are walking down the line in their one direction; that's all they've got. They ask, 'At which point were we engulfed?' There's no answer for that. Do you get it?"

Then the learned professors would start clearing their throats and looking at the clock. Izzy seldom got to broach the matter of Herbrand's death and his crucial penultimate paragraph, the paragraph that made it necessary for the aliens to shut him up.

Izzy was a single, balding, 45-year-old setup man at tool and die factories in upstate New York. He had a beer belly and a bad back which kept him moving from one job to another, punctuated by surgery and traction. Like many lathe press operators, he was missing a few fingertips. He had one long eyebrow all the way across his forehead. He always smiled on one side of his face only, and the fact that all his missing fingertips were on the other side made some of his interrogators suspect neurological

damage. He never had the slightest idea what color any piece of his clothing was or what its relative state of cleanness or putridity might be.

All of which is to say, people of the professional class, academics and government functionaries, had a lot to get through before they could start taking him seriously, even if his story had been less wild.

Fay, on the other hand, loved him.

"Izzy," she said, "Explain me again, how come it's you? How come you get to hear all this stuff, and the guys with the 'Eyes in the Skies' never get to first base? Is it like a filling in your tooth, when you hear the radio in your mouth?"

"Baby, I love you," Izzy would say. "That's it exactly. Except that it's not like a tooth, and it's not like a radio, and it's not really like hearing either. All I can say is, for me, the way I see it so far, it's mainly a combination of the color of the zenith at the time I was circumcised, along with the quality of *sincerity* as experienced by Americans of Tibetan descent, and a particular rooster's claw somewhere in Idaho, only the left one—the right one doesn't count—if this rooster hears a Dodge go by and it's a slant-six. Also, it's for sure that if the rate of daily population *change* in Liechtenstein (not the rate itself) fluctuates by more than 3% or 4%, or if people start to like the smell of burnt rubber, I'm finished, no more inside line for old Izzy!"

"Izzy, how do you know so much?"

"I read a lot, honey. God, I love the way you listen to me, Fay, baby. I wish the bigwigs would listen to me like that. Then the world might not be up shit's creek."

"Make love to me, Izzy."

And he could do that. He could make love like a crazy man. The pain in his back would feed his ardor. Everything fed Izzy when Izzy made love: the sound of a Dodge with the slant-six, thoughts in his head, smells and itches and overheard snippets of conversation, the TV, the heat or the cold, it was all fuel for the fire. Izzy was a great, if unlikely, lover.

The transmissions were his only *interruptions*.

Miriam, a very sympathetic degreaser at a shop where he worked in Buffalo, had broken off with him because of a sudden transmission. Izzy had gotten up out of bed in the middle of, well, everything, to phone his illegitimate son at the University of Chicago, where he was a graduate student in the Math Department.

"That's it!" Miriam had shrieked. "I'm finished with this crap. I don't ever want to see you again."

Izzy hadn't even said goodbye. "Willy, is that you, son? ... Yes, damn it, I know what time it is, and you are too my son, regardless of what Sylvia told you. Now just shut up a minute and tell me is there something called Fermat's Theorem and do you know how to solve it? ... How to prove it, then, do you know how to prove it? ... Yes, the last one, that's right, the last theorem of Fermat, that he scribbled in the margin of a book! Nobody's done it yet. Nobody can do it. I don't care about the guy at Princeton. He's wrong, right? Well, shut up and listen, because I'm going to tell you exactly how to do it, and you'll be a big shot, and you'll be helping to save the whole god-damned planet at the same time, but make sure you only wear one sock tomorrow, and ask the elevator boy not to say any long vowels... Willy? ... Willy, are you there?"

Miriam had yanked out the cord. She had then given it another yank to pull the phone out of Izzy's hand, and then she had thrown it at him, close range, knocking him to the floor, before bounding out of the room and his life.

"Creep!" had been her parting word.

It didn't matter. Willy would never have listened to Izzy anyway. Willy had seen a dozen "proofs" of Fermat's Last Theorem already, and they always turned out to be wrong, though it might take days to find the error. Nobody could prove it, he thought, despite the guy at Princeton, least of all crazy Izzy or his telepathic sources, whatever *they* might be. But Izzy just dogged him. It got so he

hung up the instant he heard Izzy's voice. It became a game, how quickly he could drop the receiver to its cradle on hearing his "father's" voice.

This game, as it turned out, aroused the interest of a certain untenured Professor, A. B. D. (All But Dissertation, which was, like the Tortoise for Achilles, always a wee step ahead, "honestly!"). To their mutual chagrin, Willy and Professor Hamisch shared an office.

"Let me talk to him," Professor Hamisch urged Willy. Professor Hamisch did talk to Izzy, took assiduous notes, finished a dissertation, and was laughed out of the university.

"No, it's not that it was all wrong, Izzy," Willy explained to him years later. "Nobody in his right mind would even read such a thing. There were just too many *historical* reasons to believe it was a waste of time."

"That's not at all why they didn't read it," Izzy told him, but then he mumbled up and wouldn't say another word about it.

Izzy had been shrewd though. The price he made Hamisch pay for the real proof of Fermat's Last Theorem was that Izzy would get to plead his case, on *another* matter, before a panel of experts from various academic departments. Hamisch would gather them at a certain time and place, and she would also supply coffee and Danish. Izzy would give Hamisch the proof. That was the first of several such panels that Izzy undertook to convince of the alien threat.

Fay liked to nuzzle in his armpit. "What's Fermat's Last Theorem, anyway?" she asked.

"Honey, if Willy had done like I said back then, and if the elevator boy and the Swedish ambassador, then, with a little good weather on the weekend, or even just Sunday actually, we wouldn't be in the mess we're in right now.

"The Fermat thing is a geometry thing. You remember high school geometry, $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$, right? Take my word for it, it works if a , b , and c are 3, 4, and 5, for example. I use it in the shop! Well, what about $a^3 + b^3 = c^3$? What about $a^{150} + b^{150} = C^{150}$? Can

you find whole numbers to stick in there to make it right? You see what I mean?

"I love you, Fay. It doesn't matter anyway. The important thing is that nobody could figure it out one way or the other whether this thing is true for all the numbers or not, and *right in there*, right at that little place between yes and no, that's it! That's where *they* snuck through, there and in Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet," and a couple of other places. I was trying to close up those little gaps, like pounding sand down a rat hole. That night with Miriam—who compares to you like a cockroach compares to a lioness, by the way—that night I overheard them talking about it. They were laughing about it, the way they laugh, which is hard to describe, about that and about Meyer Lansky."

"Meyer Lansky the gangster?"

"That's right, beautiful, the one who fixed the World Series."

"What was so funny about Meyer Lansky?"

"That's what's gonna save our ass, honey, wait and see. Meyer Lansky, when he was fixing the Series, *he approached the wrong team!*"

Xlik—

Just a quickie! Must convey to the Unlimited Ones, closer to us than the place where in-breath turns to out-, that some of the anomalies caused by my presence here may have caught the attention of one or two Mullers. For reasons unknown, these few drank not my poison. At least one seems to know about Herbrand, but I have not yet found what geological era he inhabits or how his gaze is flavored.

Assure the minions and the heads of the minions that their servant will momentarily clear the path to the feed bag of the Mullers' minds. Let them delay their advance for less than the life span of a small star.

Thou whose lick is my taste, soon we shall speak more intimately. Gotta run.

Brkiss

Hamisch wanted to kill Izzy. She was sure that the proof Izzy had given her was a phony. Hamisch was so demoralized by her enforced departure from the bosom of the university that she took up residence in a zen monastery somewhere in the Catskills. She just sat there staring at the wall for hours on end, thinking up ways to murder Izzy, and everybody thought she was a saint.

Hamisch got up every morning at four-thirty and sat on her round, black cushion with twenty or thirty other monks. They just sat there in black robes, legs crossed, staring at the wall till nine at night, with breaks to work in the garden or to eat. Twice each day they ran up a staircase, one at a time, to talk to the zen master, a middle-aged woman from Brooklyn named Harriet Shatavski, whom everyone called Jikido Roshi.

"Strive for enlightenment with all your might," Jikido Roshi told Hamisch. Hamisch just wanted to kill Izzy and to get a tenured position at the University of Chicago. "Several of your brother monks are very close to realization. We must all work hard. Now, sit!" She whacked Hamisch with a flat stick and sent her downstairs to her black cushion.

This had been going on for almost a week when the strange things started to happen. First, the tall guy next to Hamisch, the guy who always keeled over, snoring, into Hamisch's lap at about two p.m., suddenly stood up and started pounding the wall and shouting, "I've got it! I've got it! I see it! I'm enlightened!"

"Me too!" somebody else yelled. Then there was a whole chorus of them. Some shouted traditional Oriental expletives like "Ka!" or "Kwatz!" Others settled for "Holy shit!" or "Of course! Of course!" Jikido Roshi came downstairs to see what was going on. A couple of people slapped her in the face, and she started laughing and congratulating them.

Hamisch was having some pretty weird mind states herself. She seemed to be listening to a conversation in a language she had never heard before, but she understood every word. Somebody was being murdered, but it

wasn't Izzy; it was Jacques Herbrand, the Frenchman who had done some work on the consistency of formal arithmetic decades before. Herbrand was falling, being swallowed up by a huge snow bank, mutilated by crags of rock and ice. The voices were laughing about it. Suddenly there was a hush, and Hamisch felt that someone in her own head was scrutinizing her, as if someone had just swung open a door and caught her listening on the other side.

He was...big...old. Hamisch didn't have words for what that person was, no more than a point has words to describe a sphere. Then someone was thinking with Hamisch's mind. "This is it," he thought. "I see it! It's magnificent! I'm enlightened. I'm a prophet of God!"

"Like shit, I'm enlightened!" Hamisch cried out loud. "I just want to finish a goddamned dissertation and kill Izzy Molson!" She ran out of the monastery, weaving her way through ecstatic, crazed monks who were bumping into walls and shouting "Kwatz!" She stripped off her robe, jumped into street clothes, shoved her belongings into a #3 mail sack and ran a mile and a half to the nearest bus station, staring the whole way at something inside her own mind, something for which she would venture no name and for whose presence she would accept no credit.

At the bus station, in a vending machine, on the front page of the *New York Times*, Hamisch happened to see a headline that bothered her deep in her mathematician's soul: "OGSBURG INDICTED FOR APPROACHING TYBBEL. Gambler Accused of Fixing Fight. Commissioner Suspends Tybbel."

Hamisch collared a white-haired ticket agent and asked him, "Hey, who won the Tybbel-Warren bout last week?"

"Tybbel slaughtered him," the old man said. "It was over in two minutes fifteen of the First Round. Warren never saw what hit him."

"OK," Hamisch whispered into the phone, "what's going on?" "Professor Hamisch!" Izzy was

delighted, but not surprised. "I forgot you were going to call tonight."

"You knew I was going to call you?"

"Yes. You call me tonight, and also, the same call, 73 years from now. I mean, we're both dead then, of course, so we're not around, you and me; just the call itself is there, tonight and 73 years from now, in the summer."

"Are you supposed to be a Nostradamus or something?"

"You know what I am, Professor Hamisch, or you wouldn't be calling me. I'm just what you are: an eavesdropper."

"I knew you were listening too. Everybody was going crazy where I was, up in the mountains."

"It won't last. What about the proof?"

"It's valid. I know it's valid now."

"Yeah, I figured you knew that, but what I mean is, do you think you can get it published?"

"Nobody will listen to me now. They think I'm a nut. Jesus, I think I'm a nut."

"Well, what if I gave you a counterexample? Do you think you could get that published? It's important for everybody to know about it."

"A what? How could you give me a counterexample if the theorem is valid?"

"Listen, palsy, in case you haven't guessed it by now, things are a little more complicated than the brain boys in your Math Department savvy. What about it? Do you think they'd take the time to test out a counterexample? The whole world depends on it. What would it take them, three minutes on a computer? The numbers are going to be pretty big."

"I don't believe any of this. This *thing* is everywhere. It's right in front of me. It's inside me, Izzy. It's looking at me. It's..."

"Hold it, Hamisch, if you want to live. Don't call it any names. You've got it a little bit wrong, see? It's not looking at you. *You're* looking at it. You want to keep it that way, get it? Just don't try to get any numbers on

it. Don't measure it. Don't name it. Don't put on any airs. Keep looking it in the eye, and it won't be able to see you. *Kapeesh?*"

"*Kapeesh*. Wait a minute. What's all the stuff about Herbrand? And how in the name of God can you fix a boxing match by bribing the winner? And how come nobody else is asking this?"

"Listen, Doc, let me give you the short answer, and then I gotta go. My woman wants me, you know what I mean? And I gotta work tomorrow, and my back is killing me."

"Now, suppose you wake up some morning and look in the mirror, and you've got the face of a baboon? What do you say?"

"Jesus, what's happened to my face? What else would I say?"

"You're a million miles off, Hamisch. You'd say, 'Wow, what a dream I had last night! I dreamt that I looked like a human being.'"

"Now get your ass over to my place in Utica. Bring some Danish. We've got a lot of work to do. If I'm not home, Fay will take care of you till I get back from the factory. Right now, I gotta take care of Fay."

"Here's looking at you!"

There were two people waiting to use the phone in the Woodston depot, but Hamisch stayed in the booth till the dial tone ended and the computer-generated voice came on, instructing her to please hang up the phone. As she left the booth, she had to ask the people waiting to get in, "Excuse me, but don't you think it's funny that they're indicting Ogsburg for approaching Tybbel instead of Warren?"

One said, "How could he have bribed Warren? Warren lost."

The other said, "I hope they lock that bum up and throw away the key."

All the way to Utica, Hamisch, sitting alone near the toilet in the back of the bus, clucked her tongue, sighed, and shook her head. "I thought there were some things you could be sure of," she kept thinking. "I thought logic, math, at least, were certain, *a priori*, fixed. But no! Anything goes!" Whenever the *thing* started to insinuate itself into her

mind again, Hamisch did just what Izzy had warned her to do. She looked straight at it—if one could call that ‘looking’—without forming a word. It was a dizzying endeavor for a professional academic.

Before morning, Izzy got another call. This one was from Willy.

“I dunno why I think you have anything to do with this....” Willy said.

“Can it,” Izzy replied, “I do. Just tell me your story, son.”

“Don’t call me son. Do you know what *pi* is?”

“Do I know what *pi* is? What have I done to deserve this kind of treatment? Does the pope shit in the woods? Of course I know what *pi* is. I’m a tool and die maker, smart boy.”

“I used to think I did too, Izzy. But it’s not the same any more. I mean, it doesn’t make any sense, but *pi* is changing. All hell is breaking loose down in the computer room, but it’s not just our computer. We’re getting calls from other universities, even from the Bureau of Weights and Standards, for pity’s sake, and it’s being confirmed by manual measurements too. Try it yourself. I feel like an idiot saying it, but the ratio of the diameter of a circle to its circumference is changing, Izzy.

“Wait...! Christ, it’s changed again.”

Izzy said, “Are you finished, Willy Boy?”

Dumbly, Willy mouthed, “I guess so.”

“OK,” said Izzy, “now listen up. I’m gonna make this short because I’m damned if I’m gonna miss my beauty sleep or punch in late tomorrow. You keep tabs on the way *pi* is changing, *kapeesh*? Plot it on a graph or something. It’s gonna keep on changing for a couple of weeks or so. If you take the proportion of the new *pi* to the old one, the one that we learned in school, that’ll tell you the angle of intrusion of the alien’s plane to ours.”

“This is impossible.”

“Right. What are they saying to the press?”

“The press? Are you kidding? Nobody’s interested! The god-

damned circle is flattening out or smearing into other dimensions like a squashed fly and nobody seems to notice. If they make the calculation to confirm it, they think it’s some kind of amusing technicality. There’s nothing to print! *Yes* is turning to goddamn *no* while the world is picking its nose!”

“That’s my boy. Now you listen to me, Willy, things are going a little quicker than I thought, but there’s no reason to lose our cool about it. *Pi* will get bigger and bigger until it reaches what I’d call perpendicular if right angles meant anything any more. Then it’ll start going up and down all over the scoreboard, and when it hits zero, pfft!”

“What do you mean, ‘pfft?’”

“Don’t worry, it’ll never happen. At least I don’t think so. You just keep track of things for me, would you, Willy? And Willy, don’t daydream about having sex with anyone famous till this is over, OK? And if you come across anybody wearing denim, make the sign of the cross, and read an index.”

“An index?”

“Yeah. Doesn’t seem to matter which, but make sure you read one if you don’t want to end up like Herbrand. I’ll see you tomorrow after work. Just let yourself in if you get here before 5:30. Now let me sleep. Oh, yeah, don’t bet on any winners, kid!”

“Don’t what?”

“Just an expression.”

Xillk, Beloved, whose itch I am but,

Our food is cooked. The mind of the Mullers is scattered and fallen, for us to glean at our pleasure. Those who would glimpse us have blinked. I have their coordinates.

Izzy Molson will have his Alps, and also Hamisch and Willy, who dream him.

Xillk, oooooo!

Brkiss

P.S. —Izzy, Dost thou listen, shithead? Thou art crushed. —B.

He was turning his head inside a traction gadget and eating a

cheese Danish when the jolt hit: “*Izzy, dost thou listen, shithead? Thou art crushed.*”

“Did the rope twist, baby?” Fay asked.

“Can you believe this woman?” Izzy replied, turning to Hamisch and Willy. “Is this a beautiful woman or what? Pacman here is about to eat up the universe, and she’s thinking about my back. I love you, Fay.”

Hamisch said, “They know about us. Oh God! What are we going to do, Izzy?”

“Izzy, don’t call it ‘Pacman,’” Willy blurted. “Don’t call it anything. Didn’t you say that would cover it up?”

“It’s OK, boys,” Izzy said. “Hamisch, this Danish stinks.”

His back had been so bad that morning that he hadn’t gone to work. He and Fay had set up the ropes and pulleys for the traction device on the hook in the bathroom doorway. Izzy’s head was strapped into the thing, which was supposed to stretch his spine, though it looked and felt like a lynching.

“Well, Izzy, a lynching stretches your spine,” Fay had reasoned.

Willy was extremely nervous. He had spent several hours at the airport surrounded by members of some strange cult that kept wanting to share the light with him. The airport had been filthy with mystics. You couldn’t get away from them. He had brought a compass and straight edge along with some measuring tools and a small scientific calculator to keep track of the invasion for Izzy, but every time he had sat down to use them, some evangelist had gotten on his case.

Hamisch was popping NoDoze. “Well, what are we gonna do?” she demanded. “They’re turning everything inside out. Have you tried to read a clock lately, I mean, whatever ‘lately’ is, for crissakes? I don’t know if I’ve arrived here yet or if that’s something that happens after I’ve been here for awhile. And everybody is acting like nothing’s the matter, everybody but us.”

“Us and the religion nuts!” Willy put in.

"So what are we gonna do?" Hamisch whined again.

Izzy measured his words. "OK, so they know who we are now. That's OK. Actually, like Hamisch said about the clocks, they don't know who we are quite yet, but they know who we are. We've still got the same problem, the way I see it. We've got to close up the holes those bastards ooze in through. There's nothing we can do about "Blue Velvet;" that's water under the bridge. But if we can stop up the rest of the holes, I think the fuckers may just strangle themselves to death trying to squeeze through Bobby Vinton's creamy little glissando."

Willy pleaded, "Tell us what to do, Izzy."

"First off, I want to ask you two, because this is one thing I don't completely understand yet, have you figured out what it was Herbrand was doing that they killed him for? What made them so goddamned nervous?"

Willy spoke first: "I did look it up after you mentioned it the first time, Izzy. It's just a couple of lines Herbrand wrote as an afterthought, comparing his work with Kurt Gödel's. At that time there were these Formalists, Izzy, logicians who were selling the bill that you can get everything down to one System."

"Uh-huh," Izzy interrupted. "Coverup men! They were working for *them*, I'll lay you odds, trying to put the blinders on us."

"That's it," Willy continued. "If there were one logical System at the foundation of the universe, then anything contradicting it would just be ignored as nonsense. People wouldn't see it even if they looked."

"Like *pi* equals four," Hamisch put in.

"Is it four already?" asked Izzy, slightly alarmed.

"No," Willy said, "Hamisch is just giving an example. Well, Gödel seemed to screw the Formalists in 1931, when he showed that you can't *prove* that the system is all right, that there aren't any holes in it. But here's the thing: Gödel held out a little escape clause! You could still secure the System 'intuitively,' in a *non-for-*

mal way, he said. It was a kind of *obiter dictum*."

"Non-formal, my ass!" said Izzy. "It's an old con game. You co-opt the other side, see? 'I'm with you,' he says. 'I'm your big gun. I'm gonna KO the Formalists.' Then he pulls his punches. I wondered what kept Gödel from the lead bootees."

"Anyway, Herbrand spoiled his game," Willy went on. "He directly contradicted Gödel's little *obiter*. Here our big friends are sliming in undetected, 'at their leisure,' and Herbrand throws a spotlight on the hole they're coming in through. He said there was no such thing as the 'non-formal' basis that the Formalists needed. At the same time, he saw that he could never *prove* that!

"That's why they killed him. In that next-to-last graph, he wrote, in effect, '*We'll* never prove that there's no ground for your System, and *you'll* never be able to come up with one.'"

"So what's the problem?" said Izzy. "It sounds like the situation with Fermat's Last, the hole between yes and no. Why couldn't they just slime in through there?"

"I'm not finished," said Willy, "Here's the sockdolager. Herbrand wrote, 'There may be a logical postulate here!' For a mathematician, that's like honey to a bee. Every ABD in Christendom would be trying to get his name on that one."

"My God," said Izzy, "so that's it! If anybody followed up on that... it's like these crooks are digging a tunnel into Fort Knox, and somebody runs a tour bus through their basement."

"Yeah," said Willy, "but Herbrand croaked, and nobody would take the dead man's word over Gödel's."

"Maybe," Hamisch opined, "Herbrand was an agent for *them*, but he went over to our side in the end."

"We'll never know," Izzy said. "Right now, we've got business to do here. We've got rat holes to pound sand down. Number One, we've got to open up the Herbrand thing."

"There's a meta-mathematical convention in New York next

month," Willy said brightly. "I think I could get someone to deliver a paper. I bet I could get some international discussion going on Herbrand's conjecture. Would that be enough to do it?"

"I think so," Izzy said. "What about the Fermat?"

"Have you really got a counterexample?" Hamisch asked.

"Have I got a counterexample!" Izzy mocked her. "I got counterexamples up the kazoo."

"All right," Hamisch said, "I think I can get us published on that. There's a computer network I can still log onto. I can send it to a zillion mathematics departments in a few minutes. There's got to be some non-defrocked ABD with enough appetite and credibility to go for it and let everybody know it's the genuine article."

"That leaves the elevator boy and the Swedish Ambassador," said Izzy, "plus the weather, which is a tossup anyway, and a few odds and ends I can take care of at the machine shop tomorrow."

"You really want me to keep the elevator boy from saying long vowels?" Willy asked.

"No violence," said Izzy.

"I can do it," Willy said. "I have to."

"That's my boy."

"What about the Swedish Ambassador?" Fay asked. "What's he supposed to do?"

"Now, that's gonna be a toughie," Izzy said. He arched his back a little and winced. "Fay, could you tighten this thing just a tad? That's it, honey." He turned to look at Willy. "No offense to your mother," he whispered, "but I'm nuts about this woman, did I tell you?" Fay laughed.

"About that Swedish Ambassador, yeah, that's a toughie," Izzy went on, "but I think I got it covered, because it so happens he's a baseball nut. You can close your yaps and stop collecting flies any time now, boys and girls. Yes, I said baseball. Because of the so-called 'White Sox Scandal.'"

"The what?" said Willy.

"You mean the so-called 'Black Sox Scandal,' Izzy," Hamisch corrected him. "The team was the Chicago White Sox, so when they threw the series in 1919, with Lansky and Shoeless Joe Jackson and the rest of them, they called it the 'Black Sox Scandal,' get it?"

"Do I get it, she wants to know," Izzy complained. "Don't I get some respect for being in traction at least? I get it, all right. But you've got it backwards. The team was the Chicago Black Sox, and the scandal was the White Sox Scandal."

"Since when?"

"Since two o'clock tomorrow," Izzy said. "It gets switched around as soon as π hits three and a half. Not only that, but the Sox won. They beat the Reds in four games flat."

Willy said, "So the *Reds* threw it."

"No, no! It was the Sox. Hamisch, you explain it to him. You've been reading the papers. Anyway, there's only a few guys in the whole world who, for various reasons...."

Hamisch said, "Please don't go into them, Izzy."

"I won't," Izzy said, "but there's only a few guys, like Professor Hamisch here, for example, who are going to notice this switch and get a little upset about it."

"And the Swedish Ambassador is one of them?" Fay chanced.

"You got it, babe," Izzy said. "He's the best-placed one. We've got to convince him to get all the uncircumcised male translators in the Scandinavian diplomatic corps to sleep standing up next Thursday. Fay, I think this one is for you. I want you to be there to tell the ambassador what it means when the Sox switch happens. He'll be ready to believe us then. I told you Meyer Lansky would save our ass. Do you think you can handle it? Will you go to Washington for me, sweetie?"

"You know I will, Izzy," she said.

"If you think about dessert dishes and wear the Band-aid I give you, you can get to him as a masseuse. Can you give a massage, Fay? What



am I asking? Can Fay give a massage! Hoo boy, we're in like Flynn!"

"We're gonna do it," Hamisch shouted. "We're really gonna do it. That's the last hole except for Bobby Vinton's!"

A few days later, Izzy had a small accident by the degreasing vat. Half a gallon of acid sloshed over onto his pants, and if he hadn't pulled them down in a hurry, he would have been standing on his thigh bones. He was a little shaky at the micrometer after that, and he would have gone on home in his borrowed jeans except that he had a lot of little chores to do around the shop, a lot of little rat holes to pound sand into.

Willy called him just before noon. "Pop?" he said.

"I've lived for this moment," Izzy said.

"Are you OK? What was it, some kind of acid?"

"You heard it? You're catching those transmissions now? Yeah, I'm OK. I don't buy the farm today, the way I read it, but it's a real roller coaster ride, I'm telling you. What about you? Any Alps?"

"No, but Hamisch is having a very unlucky day."

"Stick close to her, son."

"Is Fay going to be OK?"

"Yeah, Fay's OK. She's invulnerable. Why do you think I stick around with her? She's going to live to a hundred and two, *twice*: once each way."

"What do you mean...? Never mind, Izzy. Catch you later."

"You never said a truer thing in your life, firstborn!"

As Izzy was hanging up, he noticed a kind of a blur around the telephone mouthpiece. Scanning the room, he watched the blur spread to the clock face, rolls of tape, the path of the overhead fan, eyeballs, and every round object in sight. He pulled out his micrometer and a tiny metal measuring tape to check the dimensions on a few screw machine parts.

The rate of change in π was accelerating. It was as if every Earthly circle were rotating through another

er dimension, foreshortening and thickening. You could actually trip over a drawn circle now. Impossibly, every two-dimensional circle had a palpable lip on one side that could catch your foot or drag on your fingertip.

Izzy suddenly felt dizzy. He was having trouble breathing. His chest felt like a thrown rod inside. What was happening to the clock face must have been happening to the cross sections of capillaries and bronchi and neural axons. He fell to his knees as the booming "voice" filled his consciousness:

"Die, clot! Die, plug! Die, witless Muller asshole!"

"That's it," Izzy thought back at it, "call me names. That's real sporting of you. You won't be able to see a thing I do."

It felt like an eight on the Richter scale. The specs on the factory's architecture didn't make sense any more, and something funny was happening to the air. Then it was as if Izzy had stepped out of an igloo into a blinding, hot day on the Mohave Desert. None of this had happened yet. Izzy was his sister-in-law in London, which he didn't have. A large animal passes by, and it's raining up.

"Izzy," shrieked Fay, or something like her, "Izzy, where are you?"

Willy thought, "I can't find him either. My God, did they manage to think him?"

"Please, don't let him be dead," Fay whimpered.

The factory was in flames. It was no longer even a factory; it was a piece of tumbleweed on Route 80 in Utah that had ignited in spontaneous combustion. Izzy had never existed.

"He's gone," Willy said, but he thought someone else was saying it, or that he was reading it in a magazine. "Izzy's gone. We're finished. Everything's finished."

Hamisch's mind shouted, "Listen, it's the *thing* talking. Lord, it's right inside again!"

It was the *thing's* "voice" all right, but the words were Izzy's: "Not so fast, you Unlimited Son-of-a-Bitch!"

"Izzy," they sang, "you're still with us."

"Sure I am," Izzy said in a voice more or less reminiscent of the voices of carbon-based lifeforms. "I was just out checking around for a minute. They've reported the counterexample; the academics are lining up behind it. That's two points for the home team and a tight belt line for Pacman."

"I am looking at thee, nut bag, thou thought content, thou flower in the air! What wilt thou call me? Thou canst not see me. Die, then, Food-for-thy-betters!"

Izzy could hear Fay's voice in his head, but it was distorted, as if he were hearing it through the *thing's* ear, or whatever passed for an ear. "Yes, you'll do it?" she was saying, but not yet, a couple of days from now. She was digging her fingers into his shoulders, and it felt so delicious that Izzy wasn't even jealous that he was the Swedish Ambassador. Suddenly, Fay's arms were the impression made by a shimmer of light reflected from one of Jupiter's moons through an ocular telescope on a boy scout working on a science merit badge in Des Moines. Izzy's-knowing-that was the square root of a negative number, itself a multiple of -31. The factory reeled and split into the warm feeling that you get when your mother tucks you in, three trombone slides, and the *Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant.

The translators would sleep standing up on the appointed night.

"Pop," Willy thought via Hamisch's temporal bone, "are you getting this?" It came out sounding like the piccolo solo in "Stars and Stripes Forever," but Izzy, whatever he was at the moment, was catching every word. "Everything is Aces!" The transmission was coming back from about three weeks later. "Every Ph.D. candidate between East Lansing and Bombay wants to do their thesis on Herbrand."

"Yes!" cried Izzy. His voice was a nebula. "And yet another detour sign goes up on the Transdimensional Expressway. Tough luck, *Brkjss!*"

"I will impale thee forever on the spear of my glance. I will think thee for

breakfast and know thy Hamisch for my lunch. I will sup on your pathetic will and on your urges, pulverized and scattered."

"Kiss my ass, dickbrain. Having a hard time squeezing through 'Blue Velvet,' are we? Maybe we ought to think of dieting instead of this grand menu we're proposing.

"Fay, you there?" Izzy sent out the query.

"Somewhere, Izzy, honey!"

"What about you, Willy, my boy?"

"Right up your nostril, Izzy!"

"Hamisch?"

"I'm you now, you big dope!"

"Oh yeah. I hope that doesn't last too long. Well, shall we give it a roll?"

All of them together, each in a different "voice," one like thunder, one like the Moon rising, one like a birth yelp, the other like slowly passing time, sang with all the force within them: "She wore bloooooooooooo vel-vet...!"

There was a great whoosh like that of air being sucked into a gigantic coffee can. Water sprang from a rock in Kenya. A woman gave birth to a quadratic equation somewhere in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Three new supernovas were sighted in the vicinity of the Crab Nebula. The mind of the President of the United States momentarily cleared. A junky looked up, lost his desire for heroin, and brushed his teeth. Thirty zen monks in the Catskills returned to their black cushions. The White Sox had lost the Series.

Izzy, Fay, Willy and Hamisch were sprawled all over one another on Izzy's bathroom floor in Utica, a day or two before the whole thing happened. Izzy's back was killing him.

"Willy," he managed to say, "what's *pi*?"

Willy shook himself awake and made some quick calculations.

"It's 3.1415926, as close I can figure it. It's normal, Pop."

"Anybody for some coffee?" Fay said, disentangling her leg from Hamisch's elbow.

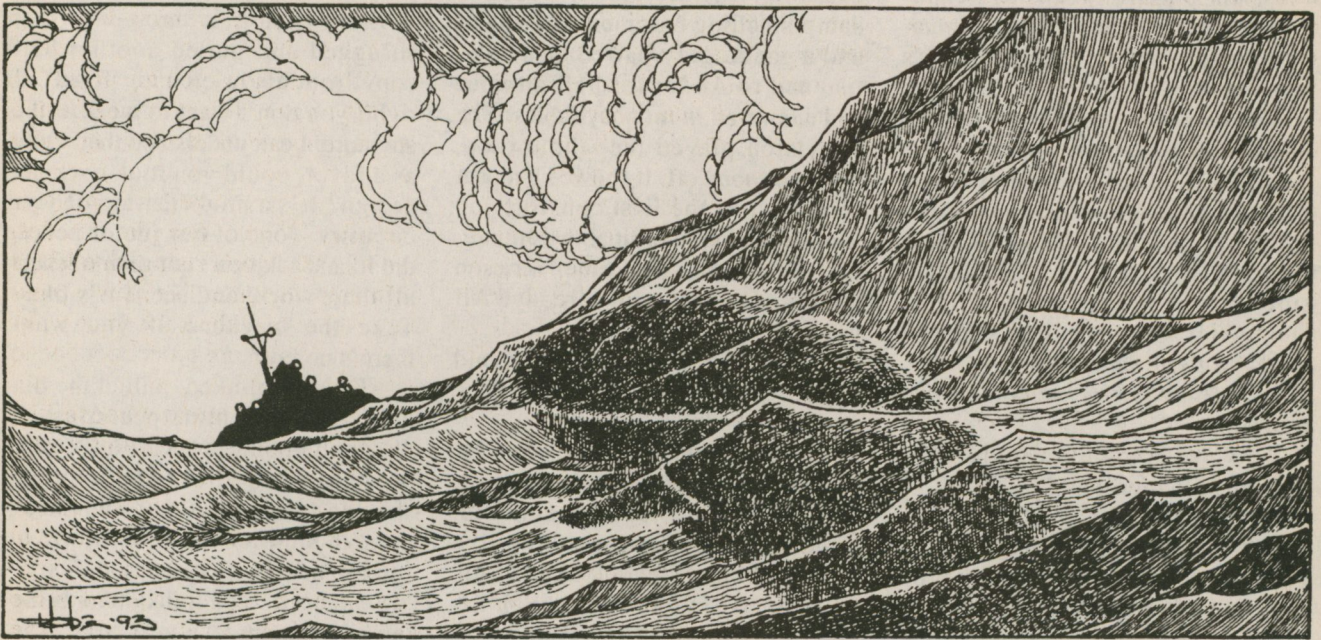
Izzy said, "Did I tell you, I love this woman?" ■

ANDOR'S WHALE

John Park

Illustrated by Bob Hobbs

He glued his credit card to the radio mast and bellowed: "For the first to sight the Rogue Whale!"



You are dreaming, with the sound of the sea filling your ears. Soon you will have to wake and take up your life, but for now you can rest in the freedom of the dream.

A steady vibration accompanies the sound of the ocean, and you know this is because the motors are at peak revs. The boat is leaping across the sunlit water like a porpoise, the hydroplanes dancing over the wave crests. The chase has been on for days now. That is why you are so sleep-drugged—the days and nights of unbroken vigilance.

Andor is pacing the deck. His left leg drags, the limp accentuated now that he is both tiring and nearing his goal. His footfalls surround you like the beating of a great mechanical heart.

The Ahab pose he struck is wearing thin now, even as it threatens to turn serious. It was almost a

joke when he glued his credit card to the radio mast and bellowed drunkenly, "For the first to sight the Rogue Whale!" Even then, his square forehead was reddened by the sun, his cheeks covered with gray-black stubble. Since that day, his beard has grown thick and wiry, his skin has blistered and peeled. You try to picture his face, one eye bloodshot, the other clear and unblemished, his cheeks and forehead the color of raw meat as he paces the deck: thump-drag, thump-drag at each stride.... Waiting.

It was a voyage that began so well. The fireworks at sunset in the harbor, the frothing beer; Cuba Libres and Spanish brandy by the tumblerful, the last sunlight off the water on laughing faces. For the start of the whale's proving trials, the media had been there in force. Andor stalked among them, waving a glass

of apple juice and feigning drunkenness. Two shadows moved with him: Ericson, there in person, ever faithful, clearing his way, assuring him that all would be well. And, invisible, her absence more palpable to him than any human presence, Celeste....

After nightfall, with the lights of the coast sinking below the horizon, the stars were brilliant, and among them, you remember, a fleck of white gold—a planet surely—that dominated the southern sky.

Have the footsteps stopped? You stir in your sleep, half-aware. No, the footsteps are still there, still ticking away Andor's time of waiting. The change is inside you. Something has triggered your memory implant and it has begun streaming information through your mind. It shows you Andor, the self-made success, working on his greatest project:

HVAL, Hydrobathic Vehicular Analogue Lifeform, or simply the whale—named for its size and the flattened appendages it uses to scull through the water.

Specifications and arrays of test data fill your thoughts. Vaguely you wonder why they are important, and when you slip away, you fall into the dream at a different point.

“It can swim, it can be more economical than any existing freighter, and quieter than an attack submarine,” said Andor. “The military’s interested already.” To Celeste’s frown, he added, “But that’s not the main reason. It can scavenge the scum off the ocean or feed like a baleen whale—track down krill and squid for the food factories. And beyond that, there’s something bigger still—”

“After you’ve got this one to work,” Celeste said, teasing.

“Right. After we’ve got this one to work.”

“We’re going to raise the children as well, aren’t we?”

“Of course.”

“I was just wondering if this is going to be another project you drop as soon as it gets close to finished. There’s something in you that shrinks from commitment, my dear love, and I’m not sure how far it goes.”

“Look,” he said, “I’ll show you the specs, and what we’ve got so far. I’ll need you to redesign the software architecture. And we have to find one more for the development lab—someone with better hardware experience.”

She gave a smile that seemed more knowing than amused. “I’m sure you’ll find someone.”

“Ericson’s an unreasonable security risk,” Colonel Aristides said. He was the controller of the whale’s military funding, which provided a larger percentage of the budget than Andor liked to admit.

Andor slapped the desk. “The hell with that. We’re not at war, you’re not my only source of funding, and if I have to go outside and

buy the expertise, I won’t meet the budget or the deadline.”

“Have you talked to him since he lost his son? Have you seen him? Do you know anyone who’s seen him lately?”

“I know someone who will.”

“C. Ericson” was printed in pencil on a slip of paper taped to the door. The letters were drawn in outline, filled in with careful cross-hatching. Inside, Andor found a damp-smelling basement apartment and a gaunt, grey-haired man, who listened to Andor for half an hour and answered in monosyllables. The television played the whole time, with the sound off. It showed a repeat broadcast of the first construction teams working in orbit above Jupiter.

“Waste. Waste of time,” Ericson mumbled. “Told you already. All waste.”

“That’s not what I asked,” said Andor. “Did you build that interface or didn’t you?”

Ericson blinked at him, peered at the circuit diagram. “Moot point, that. Someone with my name did. Used this body, or something like it—these hands.” He looked at his pale, blunt fingers, and shook his head. “Don’t think he’s around anymore, though.”

“That’s bullshit. Abilities like that, they’re what you *are*; they stay with you forever.” Did Andor believe what he said? It was something Ericson needed to believe, and perhaps Andor sensed that.

“No pictures of your son,” Andor said. “Trying to put it behind you like that? It won’t work. You know it won’t work. He’s with you now, more than if you plastered the walls with images of the crash.”

Ericson lowered his head over the circuit diagram. “Should have been me.”

“He’s inside you. You’ve turned him into a ghost, and you’re letting him call you to the grave. Soon you’ll hate him as much as you hate yourself. And you’ll need to hate him, because hate’s the only thing you’ll be able to feel.” Andor pulled the diagram away so that Ericson had

to look at him. “If you want to remember your son, give him something he could have been proud of. Think of it as rebuilding a machine. Replacing defective parts.” Andor tapped the corner of his right eye. “Glass and ceramic. And ten times the resolution of the original. I had laser surgery, corneal grafts—and that eye would never have been any good. So I replaced it. Now, your reasons for living are wearing out; it’s just the same....”

He waited a moment, then shrugged and pulled another hard copy from his briefcase. “Look, all right: you don’t want to work at this anymore. I can understand that. Only, as a favor, could you look over this design? It’s a modification of your circuitry—one of our junior people did it, and I haven’t got time to check all their work, and see if it’s okay. Take the weekend if you want; there’s no hurry.”

Ericson blinked, pulled the diagram towards him, peered at it. “Haven’t got the software anymore,” he muttered. “But...that voltage shouldn’t be left to float. And there’s a much simpler configuration you can use here, with better stability.”

“What do you think about bringing in this module, here?”

“Idiocy. You’ve got to allow at least fifty microvolts across these....” Ericson tugged the diagram towards him, tracing circuits with short stabbing motions of his fingers. Two minutes later he stopped and looked up at Andor. His eyes were moist.

Andor smiled and stood up. “I’ll leave it with you. Come in on Monday, and we’ll sign the contract. I’ll let myself out.”

He moved quickly to the door, but Ericson followed, put a hand on his elbow. “No one would trust me anymore. I’m very....” He blinked and stared at Andor, who was edging the door open. “I pay my debts,” Ericson said. “Whatever I think of you after this, I will help you, and ease your path, wherever you go.”

And Ericson, having made that commitment, was there when most of the major developments hap-

pened. He was in the lab when Andor told Celeste the real reason for his stay in the hospital.

"Your eye again? You said interface problems—the ceramics?" She was staring at the seal-spray on his forehead; her computer screen blinked at her, unnoticed.

"No," said Andor. "The new implant."

"In your head? And you pick a time like this—a place like this—to tell me?"

"I wasn't thinking."

An interesting comment. First the artificial eye, and now the implant. Looking at his wife, Andor found her face changing, becoming a pattern of planes, with unlikely coloring, an abstract geometry. For a moment he seemed to be at the top of a flight of stairs, listening for a hushed voice.

He chivvied them all back to work.

There were problems with the propulsion units, with the aspect ratios of the fins and the feedback nets that controlled them. But the part that gave Andor the most trouble, you remember, the key to making it all work, was the central control system, the brain.

"I didn't say you're greedy, Andor," Celeste said. "Greed's something different from what you do."

In the holotank the whale's image rolled sluggishly on the surface. Andor poured brandy into a paper cup and sipped. He turned to Ericson who was about to make a placating gesture. "My dear wife hates to propagate illusion. She insists we do as much of our fighting in public as we can."

In the tank, the image gracefully dived, engulfed a truckload of squid, and rose to meet the factory ship's tender.

Celeste had reddened. "God-damn you, Andor. You know I hate this, but the only time I listen is if I make a scene."

"Then why didn't you bring the twins too?"

She clenched her fist, then took a deeper breath. "Oh, you still remem-

ber them, do you? Not like that poor bastard you bribed to do the surgery on you."

"Miller," said Andor. "Karl Miller. He has to live his own life, like the rest of us." He turned to Gail, the technician in charge of the simulator. "Okay. Now show the model run."

Gail nodded, holding eye contact with him a few moments longer than necessary.

They watched silently as the previous day's disaster appeared in the holotank.

Celeste gestured at the balloons, the static holograms, the stacked paper cups beside the brandy bottles. "All this," she said, "and you haven't got the thing to do more than stay afloat. What are you going to do when it starts to swim? Hire one of the space stations for a party? Right now, all you've got is a mouth that swallows everything it can reach, then spews it out for someone else to deal with. And I'm not just talking about that thing in the tank."

Again, Ericson was about to say something soothing, but Andor suddenly waved both hands at the image of the model. "Look at it—that jerk in the fin motion. Rerun the last fifty frames at quarter speed. Yes, there it is. And there! The phase-locking's screwed up. Pull the feedback software. We'll step through it line by line if we have to. All of it. Let's go! Sea trials in four weeks!"

Andor and Celeste had agreed to be on their best behavior for the sea trials. The media were out in force. On the yacht Andor eyed the throng on the afterdeck and the media launch wallowing in their wake. He turned away.

"Relax," muttered Celeste as Andor watched her profile cleanly outlined against the blue water. "You're thinking about Phase Three again."

He turned back towards the stern, smiling at the nearest group of journalists. "Leave me my thoughts, will you," he muttered.

One of the journalists was coming over. Gail moved to his side, forcing him to turn away from

Celeste. "James Godfrey, from the *Journal*," she whispered, as she lowered her lips to her glass.

"Jimmy! I'd been hoping you'd manage to turn up. It's been too long since we got our names in the *respectable media*."

"I wonder if that's because of your recent financial record," Godfrey said. "You know, there's a story in some parts of the world that you still can't get licensing rights to the navigation package."

"Perfectly true. They want twice what it's worth to us. Fortunately we've just been able to develop our own solution to the problem, and we're right back on schedule."

"Very interesting," the journalist said. "I can quote you?"

"But of course, Jimmy. Absolutely. I've given you a scoop; we weren't going to announce it till next week. In fact our new package looks like being something everyone will be coming to us for. Now—will you excuse me for a moment? I've got to check with one of my technicians on the schedule for the trials."

As they headed towards the open afterdeck, Gail, smiling brightly, muttered, "You know the results on the navigation package came out just the way Ericson said they would. The whole design's—"

He slapped her on the shoulder and laughed. "There's probably half a dozen people within twenty feet of us who could read our lips, and another half dozen with tight-focus mikes. We'll talk about it later."

"Tonight, maybe?"

He grinned and shrugged for the cameras. His gaze flickered to Celeste who was watching over the journalist's shoulder. He suddenly felt again as if he were at the top of the stairs waiting for a voice. "All right," he said. "Tonight."

But that night, Andor was cold and preoccupied, unable to see Gail as more than a collection of textures and mannerisms, her face overlaid by imagery from his implant, devoid of meaning for him. He felt her gaze on him as he left, and could not make himself care.

And as it happened, Andor's doubts about being overheard were unimportant. Seventy-five kilometers out to sea, when the whale was released and put on autopilot, it ingested several tons of seawater, failed to correct its buoyancy, and plunged headfirst to the bottom. It had to be located by sonar and winched to the surface three days later for the post mortem.

The media loved it.

"So, we can make eyes for the blind, memories for the brain-damaged, we can set up construction facilities on the moons of Jupiter, but we can't get a simple goddamned submersible do something basic like coming back from a dive." Colonel Aristides gave the impression he was being leaned on even harder than he was leaning on Andor.

"It's an embarrassment," Andor admitted, "but we're virtually certain we know what happened..."

"...And it won't happen again. Damn right. I gather you had a defection of key personnel, as well. If that's true, we're not happy about it. It'll restrict some lines of development we're interested in."

That jolted Andor. He hadn't thought anyone outside knew yet. "You mean you'll have to go back to digging up corpses for nerve tissue if you want to miniaturize?" he said. "I haff found you a brain, master..."

"Am I misinformed, then?" Aristides asked, unmoved.

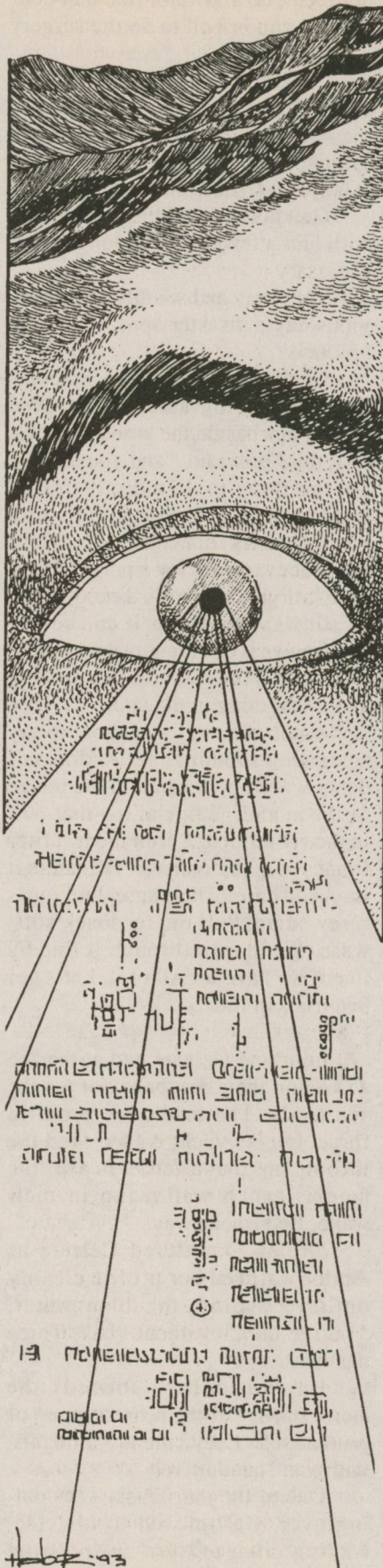
Andor drummed his fingers on the desk, then looked Aristides in the eye. "Celeste took the children with her.... She wouldn't have worked with us much longer anyway."

"With you."

"With me, then."

"You're wasting talent, driving it away. Doesn't it matter to you? Because there are some important people waiting for this project to be finished. They want to see Phase Three under way, and I really wouldn't like them to be disappointed. You understand me?"

Again you stir in your sleep, wondering what has disturbed you.



You listen, but the only sound is the rush of spray and Andor's incessant pacing on the rocking deck.

"It's not working," Ericson said for the fourth time that evening. "It's still the outer neural net: there's got to be a different way to program it." On the screen in front of him, an emulation of the whale's brain shimmered in shifting primary colors.

Andor nodded and stood up. He was thinking about Celeste. It was sinking in that some actions had consequences which could be neither reversed nor ignored, and he was learning he still had more working pain centers than he had thought possible. Gail had left a message, insisting he see her that night. She was getting impatient with him. He wouldn't go, he would stay in the lab and help Ericson, and they would meet their deadline.

He sipped his coffee and put the cup down on a technical journal, where it neatly covered the construction facility in Jovian orbit. For the twins' last birthday, Celeste had built a holographic computer model of the whole complex, complete with shuttles, air budgets and construction deadlines. The twins had turned it into a battleground, with vaporous monsters hurling up lightning bolts from the clouds of Jupiter. They seemed to have accepted that Andor would never be more than a remote presence to them. He switched on his clipboard, linked it to his implant, and watched as part of his mind doodled parallel-processor configurations.

He thought about Celeste.

Children and neighbors: Andor the juvenile bookworm with the crippled legs and the weak eye; Celeste shy with strangers, tomboyish and playful with friends, until she found a problem that challenged her. They lost touch in college. But she reappeared as a systems analyst for an aerospace firm, and Andor ran into her at a conference on industrialization beyond the asteroid belt. By then he was using the artificial eye he had developed and looking for a

place to market the technology. And his limp had almost vanished, hundreds of excruciating hours of exercise and therapy.

She gave a short lecture on the implications of some new theorems in topology for parallel processing. She was following a propulsion engineer who outlined what he claimed were the possibilities for helium-deuterium fusion drives, complete with room-scale holograms of plasma jets, the Jupiter complex, and the fifty nearest stars.

Celeste said afterwards she saw no way to compete with a show like that; and indeed by the time she started, a third of the audience had followed the engineer outside, and the rest showed the glassy stares and uneasy shuffling of those counting the minutes before the bar opened. She spoke too quietly, obviously reciting a memorized text, and fidgeted, tugged at a lock of hair beside her ear whenever she had to grope for the next line of her script. But to Andor, she was dazzling, a constellation of untapped potential.

He went up to her at the end of the questions, and they stumbled through the recognitions and into reminiscences, and suddenly the room was filling for the next talk. Each unsure what the other wanted to do, they sat down again and waited through a lecture on molecular switches.

"He's missing the point," she commented after they had finally found their way to the bar. "He's trusting someone else's analysis; if he went back to the original equations, he'd see there's no need for half that trouble—"

"It's always the connections that are the headache," Andor was saying; "so even if he's dropped a couple of orders of magnitude in scale, he hasn't solved the switching problem—particularly if he wants to work in a hard-radiation environment."

"He's thinking too much along traditional lines. If you're going to make changes on molecular scales, you have to rebuild your whole architecture as well. Otherwise it's

like saying a bronze statue of a woman is the same as a woman."

And then they realized they weren't talking at cross purposes at all.

Andor felt completely overwhelmed by her. The feeling came with a familiar image: he felt he was standing at the top of the stairs, feeling for the first step in the dark, afraid that a tread was missing.

But how much of that attraction was seeing another talent he could draw into his firm, and nurture? And how much was nostalgia for a simpler-seeming childhood? A time before sacrifices had to be made—before exorcisms.

Now the implant is feeding more data into your mind. It shows you Andor, driven by imperfection, ready to rip out his defective eye and replace it with an artificial sensor, slaving over circuit simulations, seeing his soul in the invulnerable, immutable patterns of metal and semiconductor.

You stir again in your sleep, try to sink back into its depths, but the dream is changing, and it will carry you with it. You remember now, don't you, as you lie dreaming among the incessant sound of footsteps and the waves, you remember Andor's first exorcism.

Roland. A model astronaut in an air-cushion Marsbuggy, who obeyed radio commands. A simple toy. A fragile, awkward achievement: an assembly of store-bought parts and reprogrammed microchips. A year's work. A helpless companion Andor named and tended and understood in every intimate detail. The focus of an invalid's existence.

Andor spent a year learning to design it, then testing his circuitry on the computer. And finally he did build it—during the afternoons and long evenings after his therapy, when his legs rejected the muscle or nerve transplants, and he was too weak and too restless for any other recreation. And throughout that year he dreamed. In his dreams he skimmed

over red dunes that billowed like ocean waves, like clouds. He floated across their crests under the coral sky, until the spill came, and he fell, and the fine pink sand merged with his flesh, pinned him in a trap his limbs could not break.

When he checked the last EPROM and soldered the last connection and ran his final circuit check, he felt a strange tension, like the strain that grew in his hands when he stopped their shaking so they could assemble Roland's parts. That night he dreamed he had reached the end of a corridor and was faced with a flight of steps descending into an echoing darkness. As he sat in his Marsbuggy at the head of the steps, a voice said, "You are almost ready to go on; now I am all your smallness and all your weakness."

And the next day he drove Roland twice around the house, navigating the doorways and the table legs, teased the dozing dog, then sent his creation out into the yard, to the shed. He followed it in his chair. Then, feeling he was about to dive into an ocean that would fill his sight with glittering fish and brilliant coral even as it tried to drown him, he hoisted an old lithium battery overhead in both hands and brought it down on Roland's body.

He slowly wheeled himself back to his room and sat for two hours. He thought of cement losing water and hardening, of communities selecting their old and weak and turning them out into the snow, of crippled babies put out on hillsides so that the rest could stay strong. He sat unmoving until the house monitor grew concerned and paged his guardian.

A week later he took his first steps on crutches.

Once again, the footsteps penetrate your sleep. After Roland, Andor fought his way through life. Metal braces strengthened the bones of his legs; eyes and then brain were augmented by instruments. But now Andor's discipline and training are wearing thin; the weakness they had controlled is crippling his strides. You wonder what form the end will

take when it comes for him. You sink back from awareness, as your craft plows its furrow through the oceans of sleep.

Andor watched the light from the monitor screens glistening on Ericson's wrinkled forehead and hollow cheeks. It was after midnight. Gail would have gone past impatience by now into frozen anger. Tomorrow she and he would never have been more than remote colleagues. The screen zoomed in on a map of the processor networks. Iridescent snowflakes burst upward against the screen, reappeared a size smaller, rising headlong—burst and reappeared....

"The dustball mapping!" Andor cried. Equations and geometrical figures began to chase each other down his clipboard.

Ericson caught the urgency in his voice. He swung round. "What?"

"There's a topological theorem that may apply to parallel programming," Andor said, preoccupied. "But no one's tried it; I don't think it's been published yet...."

He muttered and shook his head, suddenly short of breath.

"Sorry," said Ericson. "What was that?"

"One of the implications," Andor muttered, watching his clipboard, "seems to be that if we can get enough resolution on the electrochemical voltages, we can use a brain as a template for programming the beast." He pushed himself out of his chair and hobbled to the monitor. "Her work. I said it was Celeste's work."

Ericson was sitting watching him. "You did it deliberately, didn't you?" he said. "You knew she wouldn't stand and watch you let Gail pick you up in public like that."

"Celeste had a better career offer and she took it."

"She took herself and the children too."

"If she was successful, who made her that way? Who put her where she is?"

"Are you proud of that?"

Andor turned away and switched his implant to the main processor, and

the screen filled with geometrical starbursts that linked together into a growing multifoliate jewel.

A mind as a template. Whose mind, then, would be the one to animate Andor's greatest creation?

Put like that, hardly a necessary question.

Under the arc-lights, the water of the dock shone with oily reflections. The whale rolled like an overgrown barrel, tethered by a pair of hawsers and a crimson umbilical terminating at the optical coupling to the defective brain.

Andor prowled back and forth behind the technicians who were making the final tests on the electronics. He felt there should be thunder and lightning, bolts of incandescence, to mark the moment of vitalization, releasing him to run along the wharf screaming, "It's alive, it's alive!" But the mind-essence had been extracted from him over days, filtered, compared and correlated, Fourier-analyzed and filtered again, transformed into a set of parameters that could be loaded into the whale's brain. And now, when the animating pulses streamed from the computer, there was nothing to see but a subtle change in the patterns on the oscilloscopes.

The water still slapped and gurgled. The lights still glared. Only tomorrow would they start to find out if the whale was really capable of learning properly. So why did Andor feel that tension in his hands, and remember the smell of hot solder?

That night Andor dreamed. In his dream a ravening mouth labored through dark spaces, struggling towards the light. It devoured all it encountered, then vomited up its catch and sank back into the shadows. He awoke with Celeste's voice in his ears, and children shouting. The next day, he re-examined the design of the whale's communication package, and confirmed that it was incapable of transmitting on any frequency his implant could receive.

When the whale began its next surface trials the following week, Andor was trapped in the office, dealing with a new set of specifications from Colonel Aristides for the Phase Three contract, and dictating the program of measurements they required.

"Radiation tolerances for the hardware and hydrogen and helium diffusion rates for the structural materials. Just the normal isotopes of hydrogen and helium for the time being. We'll want the diffusion data for deuterium and helium-three as well, eventually, but for now let's assume we can extrapolate using the mass ratios, and we'll run some spot checks when our cash flow's a bit better."

The phone trilled at its top-priority pitch. Andor thought the command that routed the call direct to his implant.

In his sight lay the beclouded grey ocean, with a light chop ruffling its surface.

Ericson's voice sounded in his head. "We lost it, Andor. It dived and came up three clicks away, heading southwest. It went down again before we could get to it, and that's the last we've seen.... Sunset's in an hour and a half. If the whale's only coming up every ten or twenty minutes, we'll need military-level sonar or radar to find it tomorrow.... You understand what I'm saying, Andor?"

"Yes. Loud and clear."

"I'm sorry. It looks to me like a hardware problem."

"Yes." Andor closed his eyes and concentrated on subvocalizing for the transmitter. "I suppose it would."

"The client's observer's probably squirting a report back to Aristides right now.... Maybe we can tell them it's a test of its stealth capabilities."

"Right. Good idea."

"That was a joke, Andor. Are you all right? I've been watching you lately; you're heading for one of your obsessive phases. You've got to learn when to back off a bit—"

"So have you." Andor realized he had spoken aloud. He shook his head and drew a breath. "That's fine."

I know you'll do your best. Keep looking and I'll be out there tomorrow."

"Take it easy. It's just the two of us now."

Andor broke the connection and sat brooding. Ericson should be concentrating on finding the whale he'd let escape, not playing mind games; he was becoming a liability....

The next morning, there was a brisk wind over the water. When Andor flew out to the yacht in the helicopter, the whitecaps were dense enough to hide the whale unless it was on the surface almost continually.

Andor had brought an instrument package to be flown by balloon from the afterdeck. By midmorning, when the checks were complete and the balloon was released, the clouds were clearing. A grey, twin-rotor navy helicopter appeared, and began dropping a pattern of sonarbuoys.

The yacht followed the direction of the whale's last sighting. The instrument package on the balloon kept Andor in the control room adjusting settings, tinkering with the controlling software. During the afternoon they tracked the buoys of some illegal drift nets, and even a pod of real grey whales, identifiable by their combined radar and infra-red signatures, but found no sign of the fugitive.

The military didn't seem to be doing any better. The helicopter, or one of its reliefs, could be seen every hour or so, hovering while it dipped its active sonar head, then moving to the next section of its search.

The next day followed the same pattern, except that Andor felt he had the instrumentation under better control. He monitored it from his implant, and spent hours on deck scanning the horizon, or tugging at the balloon cable like a fisherman feeling the tension in his line. The sun beat down on him, and Ericson told him he was wasting his time, just asking for sunstroke. Andor continued to prowling the deck.

He was still there after sunset. There were a few pinkish clouds, the golden fleck of a planet.

"That's enough," said Ericson. "Get some sleep. And switch off your implant. I can watch the scopes downstairs."

In the southern sky, against the growing darkness, the bright speck seemed to throb with brilliance.

Just after midnight, Ericson picked up a return from the balloon instruments.

"Thirty-seven clicks southwest," he told Andor through the cabin door. "I'm ready to leave now in the cutter, if you can vector me to the target."

"I'll be right there," Andor called, looking for his clothes. By the time he reached the control room, the software had put a red circle around the last sighting of the whale, while the cutter was a moving white blip on the screen. Every ten or fifteen minutes, as Andor fine-tuned the instruments, the circle vanished and reappeared a few millimeters away and he redirected the cutter towards it.

When the blip reached the edge of the last circle, he switched his implant to receive from the cutter's videocam.

The night sea rolled across his inner sight. Ericson's voice whispered, "Ah, there you are. I think we caught sight of it the last time it came up; we're close."

"Nearly twelve minutes since the last contact," Andor said. "Any time now."

Suddenly Andor felt himself alone in a vast dark space. He was cruising silently, rising towards a long solid shadow that hung below the stars. His jaw ached to open.

Beyond Ericson's shoulder, starlit water flashed white as milk.

There was a shock and the horizon reeled. A darker dark loomed up and gaped.

The signal stopped.

By the time they reached the wreck of the cutter, the navy was there. The helicopter hovered overhead, its floodlights glaring on the buckled side of the cutter where the whale had rammed it. Two of the crew were being swaddled in orange survival

suits and treated for shock. For Ericson there was a silver-grey body bag connected by a cable and some plastic tubes to a steel box. As Andor watched, the bag and the box were fastened to a sling and winched up to the helicopter. When he protested, he was patched through to Aristides.

"He signed the contract. The neural tissues reclamation clause, paragraph two. You wouldn't be complaining if it was one of the hired hands."

"That's not the reason—" Andor began; then he fell silent and broke the connection.

He watched the helicopter lift away and vanish into night.

The wind was rising. Spray spat in his face. He turned and walked to the far rail, then turned and paced back. He thought about his plans to move Ericson out, and how Ericson had been manipulated into taking the last leg of the search. He remembered the ache in his jaws.

His leg had started to drag. He turned again. And paced. And listened when they brought him the results of the simulations, showing that the whale's behavior was consistent with stray pulses in one of the neural nets. A hardware problem.

He did not laugh.

He had poured his psyche into the whale; it had accepted the parts that fit, and he had set it loose. He felt himself plunging through dark spaces, seizing and casting aside. Gail, Celeste and the twins. Ericson was merely the worst so far.

The exorcism was not complete.

"Who'll come with me in the skimmer and hunt the rogue whale?"

He felt drunk, though he had taken no liquor. In his head, the implant was playing a news bulletin about a formal dinner to celebrate the completion of the first stage of construction in Jovian orbit. With the wind rising, the crew shuffled and avoided his eyes. A couple peered at the horizon as though looking for the helicopter to return.

Andor vaulted over the rail and down onto the skimmer's deck. His

knee twisted and flared with pain. He stifled it and swung round. He waved his arms at the yacht crew.

He shouted: "Who'll come with me to rid the world—?" Then he broke off and pulled out his credit card. "Here! For the first to sight his leathery hump!" He snatched up a caulking gun and stuck the card to the radio mast, as the skimmer heaved up and tilted on a breaking wave.

In his head the commentator was saying, "...the new systems analyst on the starship project, Dr. Celeste Harding, with her escort, Colonel—"

The skimmer clanged against the hull of the yacht, and water spurted between the two vessels. "Last chance!" Andor yelled. "I'm cutting loose before the storm smashes the boat. Who's with me now?"

Someone shouted, but the words were lost in the wind. He knocked the grapples loose and started the motor. The skimmer bounded free and the yacht vanished behind a hill of water.

Andor stood at the wheel, let the spray beat over him. He was idling in cool blue depths, his flattened arms barely undulating. Overhead the storm battered frail floating structures of metal and plastic. Once he shouted into the wind, "I did love her! As much as I could."

Trenches of black water opened before him and the skimmer slid down their sloping sides.

Think now. This voyage is nearing its end. What will you do then? What will you make of yourself next? Andor grew up in the trap of his own weakness. He escaped by the equivalent of gnawing off a limb, and bore the scar ever after. He had learned that the way to deal with weakness was to gnaw, and discard more and more of the treacherous psyche, to make of himself a creature devoid of caring. And if his last gesture was an attempt to undo what had been done, it was only by biting more deeply yet.

So when he played cat and mouse with the whale, did he believe he was the hunter, or was he offering



himself as a sacrifice to his own nature, incarnated in polymer and semiconductor?

It was with a kind of peace inside him that he emerged from a squall and saw the dark barrel shape heaving towards him in a shaft of sunlight. He steered towards it at full throttle, aiming to ram, and it eluded the skimmer with ease. It turned and came in from the beam. And though he had taken the spear gun from the locker and aimed into the onrushing eye, there was no doubt what the result would be.

But you know all this, don't you?

Two things you don't know. First, after they found Andor's broken body, they did some tests. The circuitry in his artificial eye showed a weak resonance at the operating frequency of the whale's central neural net. Capable of being used in communication? Perhaps.

Second, when they finally tracked the whale and recovered it, they found a faulty power transistor and voltage spikes in the outer neural net. When the transistor was replaced, the rest of the development was straightforward. It led directly to the Phase Three version.

You're listening to me now, aren't you, even though you have no ears. You're waking up. The footsteps still sound, but now you know they are not footsteps, but the pumping of a real mechanical heart. The simulation of a pulse beat was found necessary to maintain functionality for more than a few years. Andor is not pacing the deck. Like Ericson before him, Andor ceased to exist after the whale struck him. All that remains are fragments of neural tissue, groping toward a new awareness. But until we reach that state. Perhaps we may continue to use those names, you and I.

But where we? What is that hiss that sounds like waves? The sleet of radiation, yes, but what else? Air. But what atmosphere? Where are you?

Pretend you have eyes. Open them. Just for an instant.

There.

Calm. Stay calm. Just a few moments more, and you can sleep again. An ocean of cloud below, torn into mountainous ridges and abysses, and above in the black sky, a bright gleaming shape like a whale's ribcage. Where are you? What is this burden you have gleaned, and are disgorging from your distended metal gullet?

Helium-three. The fuel for a starship still being built. What you have engulfed, you now offer as a gift.

So where are you?

That's right. Look again. Just a glimpse. See there, the arch of the rings. That half-disc is Callisto.

Yes, soon you can sleep again.

But this time, remember: There are other worlds ahead, where even a

strong human body would be no more than an impediment, but a functioning intelligence would be priceless.

We will meet again, on this road between dreaming and waking. But now you may rest.

I shall watch the light of the distant sun flash from your wings as you plunge across the sea of cloud. ■

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CRACKS IN THE PAVEMENT

Sarah Zettel

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

She jumped with both fists in the air, screaming at the top of her lungs, straight for the sky.

T.Nut called it dead time. The time between the planning and the job when they just sat and waited.

This time they waited under a rickety tin awning. A blood-warm wave of rain slammed against the loose metal, wringing all the stink of heat, smog and garbage out of the sky and into the gutters.

Rosey didn't mind rain. Rain hid you, like the dark did. What she hated was waiting. Especially when it was one of those times T.Nut wouldn't say what they were waiting for.

She'd known it was going to be one of those jobs since he'd led her and Wunderbred down through the streets to the place with the busted street signs where the ghetto

met the barrio. He carried a greasy paper sack in his fist and the smell coming out of it had made her stomach rumble.

"Wait here," T.Nut said, like he always did, and he vanished into a burned-out hole that used to be a doorway.

Wunderbred obediently folded himself up on the sun-bleached, dirt-smeared concrete. Rosey leaned back against the stained brick wall, trying to ignore the heat blasting down from the sky and bouncing up off the cement. Here, the buildings were broken brick and plywood piles that slumped in ragged lines until they reached the feet of the shiny glass skyscrapers that made up the walls of Rosey's world. A rust-bucket car squealed and growled past at top

speed, tossing paper and beer cans into a burning wind. The noise from the overpass wafted down over the sound of the girls across the street playing double-dutch and chanting nonsense rhymes to their own rhythm. They sang

*Juba this,
And Juba that,
Juba stole a yellow cat!*

Rosey half-wished she could run over and jump with them, like she did when she was a kid. She'd been a champ. Now she played another game, and she was a champ at that too.

"T.Nut ever tell you?" Rosey jerked her head towards the building.

Wunderbred squinted up at her. "What, about in there? Nah." He



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stretched out his long, skinny legs. "I always figured maybe he's got a connection or somethin,' or maybe just likes playin' mystery man. Don' matter."

Rosey nodded. It didn't. T.Nut, he always knew when the alarms were busted, or the dogs were asleep, or the blackout was coming. If there was somebody in there told him all that, all it meant was the three of them kept eating regular. Pretty regular anyway.

The rain was slowing down. Single drops rattled against their shelter, tricking down the graffiti-covered wall to join the puddle oozing around their feet.

Rosey slipped up to T.Nut and wrapped her arms around his waist. His big rough hand covered both of hers, but he didn't take his eyes off the fence that sheltered their target; an aging metal-sided warehouse squatting next to the river.

"Hey, Pappé," whispered Rosey. "What're we after, eh?"

"Nuthin,' Rosey-Posey." He squeezed her hand tight and held on. "Nuthin' we're gonna keep."

Again, Rosey bit back a sigh. They were going in somewhere they had next to no chance of getting out of, to get some old papers, or something just as weird that T.Nut'd burn, or vanish away with.

"What's it all about, Pappé?" She leaned her chin against his shoulder blade.

"It's about staying alive down here, Rosey." His voice turned hard. "It ain't like it's bad enough we got no money, an' no jobs an' welfare and shit. No. The world we got to live in is sick. An' them," he spit in the direction of the warehouse, "the ones like 'em invite the sick in with mumbojumbo they found, an' they try an' use it to get what they want. But it's got brains of its own, an' all it does is use 'em to make the world worse."

"The Sick thinks we can't fight it. Thinks nobody knows what's really goin' down anymore. We're out showin' it it's wrong."

Rosey pulled back and stared at him. "T.Nut, you outta your mind?"

T.Nut's back just stiffened up and she knew she'd hurt him.

"Wunderbred, check it out," he ordered, and Rosey didn't have time to say sorry.

The stale wind blew and took the last of the rain to piss on somebody else. Wunderbred slid out from the shelter. With his back plastered against the wall, he slipped around the corner.

"Clear!" he hissed.

"Okay, Rosey." T.Nut held out the wire cutters. Rosey nodded sharp, once, and stuffed the cutters into her skirt. She kicked off her shoes and slung them around her neck on knotted laces.

Rosey ducked out into the empty street. Her eyes automatically picked out the darkest spot between the streetlights and she scuttled across to the fence.

People thought fences made them safe. People thought barbed wire'd take care of them. Wasn't no fence could keep Barefoot Rosey out. No way. She dug her toes into the holes between the wire, grabbed hold of the fence higher up, knotted her muscles, pulled, scrabbled, heaved, dug in and pulled again. The fence pressed against her belly and breasts as she dragged herself hard over it, fast and faster.

What the hell's T.Nut mean about 'them with their mumbojumbo?' She fumbled for another toe-hold. The slanted stretch of barbed wire closed over the night gray sky, almost within reach. He believed it, whatever it meant.

She hung from the fence, gasping, six feet off the ground, with the wires digging into her fingers and feet.

Don't matter, she told herself. If T.Nut's crazy, then you got a crazy takin' good care of you.

Rosey tilted her head back so she could look up at the barbed wire. Past the wire, her eyes caught the floodlit parking lot. Slick blacktop reflected the light like a pool of water waiting for her.

The thick, damp heat that filled the air trapped the idea in her head. Water waited, six feet down, all quiet and still for her.

"Rosey!" The heat waves parted just a second to let T.Nut's whisper-shout get to her. She tore her burning eyes away from the blacktop and got busy.

She reached out with the cutters as far as she could and let them bite through the wire. Heat sent sweat trickling down her cheeks and arms. The silver line snapped in two and swung away. Business-like, she snipped off the other end and let the wire fall dead to the ground.

Rosey stuffed the cutters back into her skirt and, biting her lip, pulled herself through the hole. Half-in, half-out of the opening, she looked down at the still, wet blacktop. She kept her mind closed tight around the fact that T.Nut counted on her, wriggled herself through and jumped.

Pain shot up her ankles and knees as she hit the solid ground. She ignored it and scrambled backwards. First T.Nut, then Wunderbred ran across the street. They jumped up to the fence and scaled it to land panting beside her. T.Nut grinned at her, and even Wunderbred screwed up a smile.

Nuthin' can keep us out. She pulled herself to her feet. Nuthin' at all.

The boys were already halfway to the tin-sided box of a warehouse. She had to run to catch up. Her bare feet hit the warm blacktop, making a noise like splashing shallow puddles.

Wunderbred skirted the warehouse wall to the corner. "Clear!" he signaled.

T.Nut sidled up behind him, past his shoulder. Rosey slid after him and got to his side in time to see him bend over the lock and start to work.

While he worked, Rosey had time to get itchy.

Where's the guards? She shifted her weight from foot to foot. The floodlights made a white haze that covered up the silent dark. She couldn't even hear the noise from the freeway here, never mind the noise from people. *Where are they? Ain't no way nobody'd leave a place like this wide open at night!*

"Got it," breathed T.Nut. The double doors sang as he leaned on

them. The hazy light showed up metal in his hand.

T.Nut clutched a gun.

A gun! Rosey felt her mouth fall open. *T.Nut never carries no gun!* For the first time, she felt how slow and heavy her heart was beating. She glanced back at Wunderbred. He only had shadow where his eyes should be, but she saw him gawking. He'd seen the gun too.

They followed T.Nut inside anyway. What else were they gonna do?

Wunderbred flicked on the flashlight. The beam landed on wooden crates, stacked right up to the ceiling. They were long, thin things, like piles of coffins waiting on the dusty, grey painted cement.

The beam flashed on frosted glass way, way on the other side of the room.

"There," said T.Nut, and he started across the floor.

It was even hotter in here than outside. Heat piled up between the coffin-crates until it squeezed out into the narrow aisles. The three of them had to wade through the choking weight of it, and it pushed back at them.

"Rosey." Wunderbred dug his fingers suddenly into her arm. "Rosey, this is bullshit."

She wanted to agree more than anything in the world right then. But T.Nut heard him too. He froze in his tracks without turning around.

"What's bullshit is you just standing there," he snarled. "Come on, are you in this or what?" Under his anger, Rosey heard the plea.

He's scared, she thought. Despite the fact she was sweating bullets and rivers, her stomach turned cold. *Bet his hand's shakin', an' that's why he won't turn around.*

What are we doin' that can scare T.Nut?

"Get out, Wunderbred." She pushed his hand away. "Wait by the fence."

The shadow of his Adam's apple wobbled up and down. "If you're goin' in, Rosey, I'm goin' with you."

Rosey didn't have time to think about what all that meant. T.Nut was moving forward again.

She padded after him. The heat and silence and T.Nut's crazy talk twisted around her senses and the world warped into bad dreams. The coffin boxes waited all around them, filling up the corners, reaching up to the unseen ceiling. The heat pushed the coffins, crowding them close to the intruders. Wunderbred's flashlight cut them a way through, kept the coffins back, just a little.

The heat didn't like that, so it started kicking up the dust. Clouds of it, like smoke out an old car's back end. It filled up Rosey's throat and clogged her eyes. It stuck in her sweat and itched.

Crazy. Crazy. Just me bein' crazier than T.Nut even, she tried to tell herself, but behind her, Wunderbred's shaky breathing turned into wheezing and hacking.

Ahead of her, T.Nut slowed down. "You can't touch us," he said, soft and dangerous to the dark. The air stood still. No rats, no footsteps, no noise at all. Just them, the coffin crates, the dust and the swaddling heat. "You ain't even real." But now his voice turned all shaky and thin coming out.

Wunderbred coughed once more, then he snivelled, but the dust was settling down. It made a soft crackle like a chuckle as it landed on the floor and on the crates.

"T.Nut, what 'chu got us into?" Rosey murmured around the fear building inside her.

"Ain't nuthin' I can't handle, Rosey-Posey," he croaked. "We just gotta get what's in the safe, an' then we're outta here. Out the back window, just like we planned."

The dust stayed put, so did the crates. Even the heat held still. *Letting us in,* Rosey thought, although she didn't want to. *It's letting us in, gun and plan and all.*

After walking a million years through the dark, they did reach the office door. Rosey had to take the flashlight away from Wunderbred, his hands were twitching so bad.

T.Nut worked the lock hard, with clumsy fingers, his lips moving all the time.

The lock clicked open. Rosey's pulse doubled up. T.Nut pushed the door open slow and they all crowded back, but not fast enough to get away from the icy wind of the air conditioner clanking and thumping in the back somewhere.

"Watch the door, Wunderbred," growled T.Nut. "Shine that light around, Rosey. Where the hell's the safe!"

Rosey played the light all around the walls, making bits of room jump out at them. Table. Desk. Window. Gray wall. File cabinet. Safety poster. Closet door.

T.Nut practically flew across the room to rip the poster down. The light showed up a black dial in a dull metal square. Wunderbred let out a loud breath. Rosey shuddered.

T.Nut fumbled in his pocket and dug out a scrap of paper. Rosey barely remembered to get the light up. The lock rattled as he spun the dial. Rosey was ready to swear she heard it echo round the room, even over the air conditioner's banging.

The safe door swung back and the light landed on a thick book all alone inside. Its cover and edges were all crumbly, like something out of an old movie.

"But what the hell's it for!" Rosey barely realized she had spoken aloud.

"Names." The sound of T.Nut's voice made her jump. She hadn't expected any kind of answer. "Names that'll give the Sick a shape. Let it get up out of the dark and go walkin'." He tried to snort at what he was saying, but he couldn't quite make it. "But we ain't givin' 'em the time to use it right." T.Nut reached out one hand for it.

Fear, bitter fear roared out of the safe. It grabbed hold of Rosey and turned her inside out. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't even breathe. She tied to snatch at T.Nut's arm, but he was out of reach. Back to the safe and gun up, his eyes were wide and wild.

"Dammit!" shouted T.Nut. "Get away from me! Get away!"

"T.Nut...." groaned Wunderbred.

Rosey whipped herself around. Wunderbred backed up slow from the doorway. There was nothing there. Nothing, but her heart was pounding fit to burst through her ribs anyway. The low wailing noise that rose through the fear was coming out of her.

Too late, too slow, whispered the fear to her heart and lungs. *Now there's no way out for you.*

Rosey tried to look to T.Nut but that just doubled up the shakes and the pounding inside her, because T.Nut was weaving and wobbling. He heard it too, she knew that for sure. T.Nut tumbled against the slick, grey wall.

No way out for you, whispered the voice of the dust and the heat.

The world collapsed around Rosey, squeezing her head and her lungs. Her heart stopped, and pounded, and stopped again. She heard Wunderbred whimpering, saw T.Nut sweating and trying to hang onto his gun, even though there was nothing to shoot at but shadows and the fear.

All at once, T.Nut swung the gun around and the crash of the shot faded into the shivering noise of busting glass.

T.Nut slumped down onto the floor. The gun slipped out of his fingers. Spit and gagging noises bubbled out of him.

Rosey didn't think. Couldn't think. Her legs carried her across the room, jumped her out the window, through the broken glass and the gurgling noises T.Nut made. She landed hard on the blacktop. Glass sliced into her palms and knees. She dove across the parking lot, running blind. Couldn't hear Wunderbred, but she could still hear the sound of T.Nut dying. The voice spoke to him and he believed it, because he'd never had nobody to get him out of trouble like she had. It'd always been just him in charge.

The fence blocked the way in front of her. Rosey threw herself at it, clawing for a hold. The heat grabbed her. Below her feet, the asphalt hunched itself up. It reflected the haze off its slippery skin and reached

up for her; a live shadow, a nightmare blanket.

Rosey sobbed. Through tears, she thought maybe she saw Wunderbred, heard his feet drumming on the blacktop. Something was drumming. Wunderbred's feet, her heart, the whole world, maybe. She didn't know. Her mind whirled and battered against the inside of her skull.

The shadow slumped back to the ground.

Rosey gagged on nothing but air. She scrambled over the fence, hit the ground, and ran.

The streets made a gray and white blur around her. Part of her mind heard the noises of cars and people in a lurching jumble. She saw the people watching her run. Mobs of them, sitting on their cars on the sides of the streets, surrounded by the heat, pale eyes in shadows staring at her as she ran, crying, past them. They never moved, they just stared at her like they were already dead, killed already by what was behind the dust and the fear. Dead like T.Nut.

Pain screamed up and down her legs, but she kept running. She smelled gunpowder, heard T.Nut die, saw the pale eyes watching her, saw shadows reach for her ankles until tears shut off the world outside the fear and the pain. Her lungs burned. Her guts burned. Her throat tore itself with choking.

Finally, a wall smacked up against her. Brick tore her skin as her knees gave way and she slipped down to the pavement. She buried her face in her bloody hands and cried; screaming and sobbing and shaking like she was going to fall to pieces.

After a long, long time, her head couldn't take it and blacked everything away from her.

"Rosey! Rosey!"

The voice cut through the darkness in her brain. It hurt. Her eyes tore themselves open but couldn't focus. There was too much light. She screwed her eyelids shut. A damp hand shook her shoulders.

"Please, come on, Rosey!" begged the voice. Her eyes opened

slow and now she could see Wunderbred. Sweat and tears smeared the dirt on his face.

He tugged at her now. Despite the heat of the daylight scalding the filthy pavement all around them, his hand was freezing cold. "Let's get outta here."

In his trembling voice, Rosey heard a gun shot echo and T.Nut choke. She remembered the shadows, and how the whole world spun itself up with fear.

She remembered T.Nut dying.

"Yeah. Okay. We'll go." She pushed herself off the concrete.

She didn't look back at Wunderbred. She aimed her eyes down the alley and started walking. She felt so hard, she could have walked through the dirty walls letting the graffiti fall in ribbons around her shoulders.

She heard Wunderbred paddling beside her. Her eyes didn't see him. All she could see was the way she was going. All she saw was the burned out doorway.

"Oh no...." Wunderbred's hand was still cold as he laid it on her arm.

She shook him off but didn't move away. "They killed T.Nut," she grated. "Whoever's in there." Her eyes focused on the black hole that used to hold a door. "They sent him out to die." Saying it gave her enough anger to start her feet moving again.

Wunderbred didn't even try to follow her.

The cement under Rosey's feet turned to splintery wood. The dark swallowed her whole. She blinked and put her hand up like she thought she could brush it out of the way. The place stank from garbage, rotting wood and piss. Rosey gagged.

A shred of sunshine landed on the edge of a step going up. Rosey put her foot on it and it moaned. Her one hand found the jagged end of a busted railing. Her other found the damp plaster wall. She climbed slow. The stairs creaked and whined under her weight.

Better'n any alarm, she thought, her eyes straining to see where she was going. *Whoever's up there sure as hell knows I'm coming.*

Finally, her foot searched for another step and found only more flat wood. Her eyes darted every which way. The dust in her nose reminded her of the warehouse and she shuddered.

A hint of daylight slipped out from under a door. Rosey moved towards it, trying not to shuffle or shake.

Remember what they did, she told herself, trying to harden up her heart again. Remember what happened to T. Nut. T. Nut who never hurt you, never hit you, cared about what happened to you.

Her shoulders straightened up and she pushed open the door.

On the other side waited a room that could have been an apartment once. Wallpaper tongues dangled off the walls. Sunlight streamed in around the grimy glass teeth that were left from the window. It drifted over nameless bundles of junk, glinted on dust and annoyed the roaches scuttling across the warped floorboards.

“So, you’re Rosey-Posey.”

Rosey jumped. Something rustled in the far corner and her eyes fastened on it. Now she saw it wasn’t another dusty junk pile. It was a black man, as withered and rotted as the floorboards he sat on. He’d been propped up against the wall. Light glittered in his sharp eyes.

It hit Rosey then what was wrong with him, why he had to be set there like that. His colorless shirt and pants were wrapped around a bony body that didn’t have any arms, or any legs.

He opened his shrivelled mouth and laughed at her. “Not what ’chu thought you’d find’ eh’ Rosey?”

“Who’re you?” she demanded with a trembling voice.

“Me?” He chuckled. “I’m the one who killed your T.Nut. That’s what ’chu been thinking all this while, ain’t it, Rosey?”

Never mind how he knows! Just never mind it! She forced herself to take two steps towards him. The floor dipped and swayed, and she couldn’t go further.

“You sent him in there!” The words caught hard in her throat.

The old man’s head waggled back and forth. “He sent himself. It tried to tell him what waited in there weren’t nothin’ no gun was gonna stop. Tried to tell him it was too late for that, even if they hadn’t finished with the book yet. He wouldn’t listen to me, ’bout that. Poor kid figured if you could steal from it, you could shoot it.”

“What was it?” Rosey swallowed against the memory of the fear that rushed out of nowhere.

The little eyes gleamed at her. “It was the city,” he said. “The sick part, let out by the names in that book. The part that chews you up and don’t leave nothin’ behind. The part that rips your soul outta you while you stand there watchin’ it.”

Rosey listened to the creaky voice, to the stupid, impossible things coming out of the broken man propped against the wall smeared with dirt and charcoal streaks.

And she believed. With no room for questions, she believed. It all made sense. It was what T.Nut tried to tell her about them, and their mumbojumbo.

Of course he wouldn’t think there was nothin’ he couldn’t tackle. He was too proud to believe that. And that was how it got him, ’cause he was too proud to believe anybody else could get him out once he’d given in.

A tear prickled her eye and slipped down her cheek.

“Ain’t nothin’ I can’t handle, Rosey-Posey,” she heard T.Nut tell her from the back of her mind.

“Wanna get it?” rasped the old man.

Rosey’s whole body jerked back. “What?”

“Wanna get it?” he said again, grinning’ all sneaky. “For what it did to T.Nut, for what it’s gonna try an’ do to you an’ that little white boy outside when it catches up wit’chu. The dark that reached up for you, you want to get back at it?”

Rosey stared. Her arms fell flapping to her sides. The old man just kept on grinning. “Who you think got

you outta there, Rosey-Posey?” The grin dropped away. “Woulda got T.Nut out too. If I coulda. Swear I woulda.

“What do you say, Rosey?” His voice went soft.

Rosey swallowed hard. “I can’t go back in there and get that book,” she said although she was full of shame about it. “I can’t do it.”

“Nobody’s askin’ you to,” he said. “It’s too late for that anyhow. There’s other ways, Rosey, now that it’s loose. Ways the Injuns ’at used ta live here thought up when the sickness was comin’ out of the night at ’em.

“They knew it was a sneaky sonofabitch. Liked dirty jobs, stabs from behind. Nuthin’ hurts somethin’ like that more’n courage, more’n showin’ it you ain’t afraid.

“They used ta dance to keep it back. Pound on them tom-tom drums, and yip away all night, burnin’ these big bonfires. The sickness knew they weren’t afraid then, an’ that fact hurt it, hurt it bad.

“Not enough of that goin’ on anymore, Rosey. Everybody jus’ lays down an’ lets the sickness take ’em over.”

Rosey swallowed. Part of her wanted to run away, back down to the street, let Wunderbred follow her to anywhere that wasn’t here. But her feet wouldn’t move, because a bigger part of her wanted to believe there was something, even something totally crazy she could do to get back at whatever-it-was that had stolen T.Nut from her.

“So you’re sayin’ what I gotta do is make a fire an’ dance around it?” she said, half trying to sound like she knew he was disin’ her. “I’ll get arrested so fast I won’t have time to turn ’round.”

“Nope.” The head waggled on the ropy neck again. “Don’ need no fire, Rosey. Jus’ get yerself down there. To the warehouse. By the river’s fine. Go in the daytime. That’s when it’ll be worst. Stuff that’s gotta hide comes out at dark. What you gotta worry about is the stuff that ain’t hidin’ itself no more.”

"But I gotta dance."

"Yeah, that you gotta do."

"Shit, ol' man, I can't dance."

She looked away out the window. There weren't no cars rattling by down in the street, just the distant rumble on the overpass.

"Then jump up an' down, girl!" he exploded, his old head coming forward like he wanted to bite her. "Don' matter you ain't doin' the rumba, or whatever it is you Spics is s'posed to do! What matters is that you're there!"

His head thudded back against the wall and a little spit dribbled out of the corner of his mouth. His withered tongue licked it away.

"I'm gonna get locked up in the nuthouse," said Rosey weakly.

"Then you'll have three meals a day an' a roof over yer head," said the old man, knowing he'd won already. "Can't be that bad."

"Ain't got no drum," she tried one last ditch.

"Find one," he told her flat out. "Maybe you can get that little white boy to play it for you."

"Wunderbred?" Rosey straightened up fast. "Man, that's the craziest thing you said yet."

"Ain't that crazy' Rosey."

Wunderbred came through the doorway. Even where she was standing, Rosey could see him shake, could see his eyes slide right past the old man in his corner like he couldn't stand looking at him.

"How long you been there, Wunderbred?" asked Rosey, confused.

"Long as he's—" Wunderbred waved one shivery hand at the old man, "—been talkin.'" He swallowed so hard Rosey heard the gulp. "If you're gonna...do what he said, I'll, I will too."

Rosey looked back at the little old man. "Do we go now?"

"Go whenever you feel like it." He tilted his head back and studied the ceiling. "But I'm tellin' you, it's loose, and the longer you wait, the longer it's gonna have to get ready for you."

"Okay." Rosey turned away and headed for the door. "Come on, Wunderbred."

Behind her, she thought she heard the old man whisper, "Thank you, Rosey-Posey."

The warehouse didn't look much different in the daylight. It still hunched pale and low at the water's edge, surrounded by its stretch of fresh blacktop. She and Wunderbred stood on the cement pier. On one shoulder, the city towered over them, on the other, the river that split the city in half crept slowly past, reflecting the smoggy blue sky back up at itself. All around them, the whole world rushed and rumbled about its own business.

The whole world moved, except for the two of them staring at the tinsided warehouse through the metal net of its fence and mended barbed wire.

Wunderbred had dragged up a big old can that looked like it might have once held a couple gallons of paint. He hugged it to his chest, his huge eyes on Rosey.

"Kay, we're here." He shifted from foot to foot. "Now what?"

"Sit down and start poundin' on that thing," Rosey's voice shook around the words. "Go on."

Wunderbred crossed his legs and sat down like the concrete was going to burn him. He wound one skinny arm around the can so his elbow pointed at Rosey. Looking right at her, he slapped his palm down on the can's bottom.

The noise bounced thinly against the concrete and up to Rosey's ears. Wunderbred brought his hand down again, and again. The rhythm was uneven, unsteady and uncertain, but he kept at it, watching her, waiting for her to do something.

"Then jump up an' down!" she heard the old man holler at her.

Rosey swayed. In the back of her head, she remembered the girls she'd heard the day before playing double-dutch on the sidewalk, swinging their two ropes, slap-slap against the pavement. Slap, slap, like Wunderbred's hand against the tin can drum. Like she used to do when she was still a kid. Slap, slap, slap, slap. Rosey picked up one foot and jumped. She

came down, picking up her other foot as she did, hopping over a pair of imaginary ropes that curved over her head and swung back down to hit the pavement. Her feet made little slaps of their own, countering Wunderbred's. Together they made a double noise. Slap SLAP slap SLAP! Just like the double-dutch noise. Slap SLAP slap SLAP. Rhymes came back to her, the ones she'd said to keep the rhythm going. Rosey opened her mouth and sang.

Aunt Dinah died.

How she die?

Oh she die,

Oh she die,

Oh she die like this!

She brought her left foot up, right foot down, up left, down right, up, down, over and over. The heat from the pavement tingled against the bottom of her calloused feet and the double rhythm steadied itself out. Slap SLAP slap SLAP!

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang!

I can shake my body.

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang!

I can do kar-a-te!

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang!

I can hurt somebody!

Wunderbred's hand came down against the drum and Rosey's feet drummed against the pavement.

I can hurt somebody! The words sang inside her head to the drumming of her feet and Wunderbred's hand. *I can hurt! I can! I can!*

The heat began to move. It circled around her until sweat plastered shirt and skirt to her skin. At the same time, the drum got louder and faster. Rosey brought her feet up and slapped them down, harder and harder still.

My name is Rosey, uh-huh!

And I'm a star, uh-huh!

You mess with me, uh-huh

I'll take you far!

Rosey's arms swung themselves over her head. The rhythm filled her now. It swam inside her ears and down into her veins. Her heart echoed it, her feet followed it, pounding the pavement. The heat began to

dribble away from her. Rosey stretched her hands to the sky, stretched her head back to look at her fingertips, black against the sunlight. The rays shone down to try to cut her open with their heat, but there were clouds piling up, right over the wall of the city skyline, big, dark billows. The wind whipped at Rosey's tattered hem and she laughed.

Under her feet, under the rhythm of the drum and the dance, the pavement cracked. A jagged black line ran through the white pavement, wide as two of her fingers, then wide as three. Her foot came down on the edge and lightning pain jumped up her leg. Another crack split open like a silent mouth. She landed on top of it. Her skin broke wide against the edge and Rosey gasped.

Wunderbred's hand skipped a beat. The heat swooped down on her.

"Don't stop!" screamed Rosey. "Don't stop for anything!"

She jumped, and jumped again, left foot, right foot, up, down, onto the white patches between the cracks that skittered under her. She missed the solid ground, she missed again, and the ragged edges bit into her soles. Clouds blocked out the naked sun now, so the heat uncoiled from the darkness in the cracks and wrapped itself around her, dragging against her, trying to drag her down under the cement.

Tears mixed with her sweat on her face as her blood ran down into the cracks in the pavement. Rosey threw her head back and shouted wordless pain into the sky.

In answer, the clouds tore open and let the rain pour down. In one second Rosey was drenched. She heard Wunderbred sputter, but he didn't stop his drumming. Rain rattled and wriggled into the cracks, carrying Rosey's blood down with it, into the earth, into the dark, drowning the heat, filling the emptiness.

Rosey heard herself laugh. She grabbed up her skirt and swung it around her, kicking her heels up high.

"T.Nut!" She shouted up to Heaven, making the water splash around her ankles. "Lookit me, T.Nut! Lookit me! I can make it



rain!" She jumped lightly over the cracks like the ballet dancers she saw on TV.

"Ro-SEY! Ro-SEY!" A new voice surprised her, and she swung around towards Wunderbred, pounding on the drum and shouting out her name with a big, stupid grin across his face. "Ro-SEY! Ro-SEY!"

Ro-SEY! Ro-SEY! echoed the rain that drummed against the concrete as she spun around on her tiptoes.

Rosey...Roosseeeeeeyyy... whispered the wind struggling through the rain to brush against her ankles. She knew the voice. This was the voice from the warehouse. The voice of the fear that killed T.Nut.

Rosey, it said. *We're coming to watch the show!*

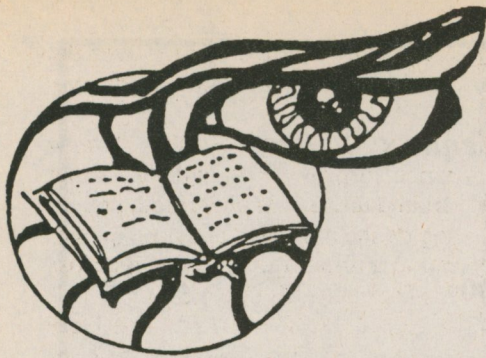
Her head yanked itself around to stare at the fence. Water fell on the wire, making it shimmer. Behind the chain and the barbed wire, she could see darkness gathering. It clung to the wire and smothered the glint where light hit water.

Wunderbred saw it too. She knew he did because the drumming picked up its pace under his hand. Her feet answered it, stamping on her toes, fast and crazy to Wunderbred's panicky rhythm. Her heart wobbled in the base of her throat.

The floodlight's mercury haze oozed up to the fence now. It touched the dark where it clung to the wire, but didn't blot it out. It hung onto it and made it shiny, pulled it up and spread it thin. A curtain of nighttime and dead-light stretched out against the back of the fence, stretched into a blanket, a shroud for her and Wunderbred.

"No!" she hollered towards the oozing dark and the wire. Her foot came down on a crack and her ankle doubled up sideways. She screamed as she toppled onto a jagged tear in the cement. Her blood mixed with her rain ran pink down into blackness. The concrete was hotter than daytime under her. The rain beat down hard and pitiless, out of control against her back.

"Rosey!" shrieked Wunderbred. The drumming stopped. She heard



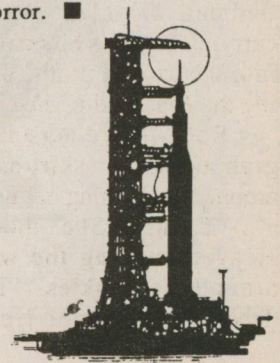
The Illustrators in This Issue

David Lee Anderson, our cover artist, is a science fiction illustrator from Oklahoma City, OK, who also teaches a university class and sings rock to finance his parenting job. (He is also one of the nicest people you would ever hope to meet.) Among many other things, some years ago he illustrated the Grand Prize-winning story in the Writers of The Future Contest.

Kandis Elliot draws her principal salary as a biological illustrator for the University of Wisconsin, as well as being the Production Manager for this magazine. **Kelly Faltermayer** was born in El Salvador in 1965, and came to the USA in October, 1980, learning the basics of English during his first year of American schooling. He is a graduate of the High School for Performing and Visual Arts in Houston, TX, and subsequently attended the Otis Parsons School of Design in Los Angeles. He first came to public notice in L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of The Future Contest a few years ago. He works as Promotion Assistant for a chain of weekly newspapers in Houston. **Bob Hobbs** lives in Rhode Island, and is an emerging talent in illustration. Like many of our artists in this issue, he first came to public attention in the L. Ron Hubbard Illustrators of The Future Contest. **Judith Holman** has an MFA, but refuses to give details. She chucked all that to illustrate science fiction, and is currently doing work for *Pulphouse* and *Haunts*, as well as *Tomorrow*. She has done a jacket for the Brian Lumley book, *The Transition of Titus Crow*. She had a nearly sold out show at Philcon, with an award for the book cover. **Margaret Ballif Simon** has served two terms as president of the Small Press Writers/Artists Organization, is serving as president of the Science Fiction Poetry Association and editor of their magazine, and has won both the Best Artist and Best Writer/Comic Artist of SPWAO. Since 1985, she has also gained a number of publishing credits in poetry and prose, both fiction and nonfiction. **Susan Van Camp** came into SF art via comics. Her most recent work includes color illustrations for FASA's *Shadowsrun* role-playing game and TSR's *Dragon* magazine. She is assisted by her dog (Trouble) and her cat (Lola). And the climate of Michigan ("What, go out in THAT?") **Timothy Winkler** is another Illustrators of the Future winner. In addition to doing illustration work for the University of Tennessee and other clients, he is currently a student in the art department. ■

The Writers in This Issue

William Barton is an engineering technician and educational software developer. He has been writing professionally for twenty years. He has written five science fiction novels, published by Ace, Bantam, and Doubleday. His most recent is *Dark Sky Legion* (Bantam Spectra, 1992). His nonfiction has appeared in such diverse periodicals as *Ad Astra* and *Commodore Magazine*. **Don D'Amassa** has been reading SF for over thirty years and reviewing it for almost twenty. His first novel was published in 1988 and he has subsequently sold more than three dozen stories. **Daniel P. Dern** is a rising star in science fiction circles. **Eliot Fintushel** travels the length and breadth of the United States, giving masque and mime shows. **David C. Hodgkins** has only published one other story, in a 1950s *Infinity*. He does not write much. **Steve Martindale** was born in Tucson but lives in Phoenix, where he is among other things a marketing specialist. Some years ago, he broke into writing in the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of The Future Contest. He has sold another story since, and a novel may sell soon. Please nominate him for the Hugo when it comes out. **John Moore** is a chemical engineer who lives in Houston, TX. He originally came to public notice with a story in the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of The Future Contest. His first novel, *Slay & Rescue*, was published in January by Baen Books. **John Park** was born in England, moved to Canada for graduate studies (and Clarion East), and is now a partner in a scientific consulting firm in Ottawa. **Steve Rasnic Tem** has sold 200 short stories to such publications as *Asimov's* and *Best New Horror*. He won the British Fantasy Award for short fiction in 1988. And he is one of SF's most accomplished poets. **Della Van Hise** is 38, and lives in Yucca Valley, CA. She is the author of *Killing Time*, a Star Trek novel. Her interests include metaphysics, martial arts, and alternative healing methods. **Sarah Zettel** is a technical writer from Detroit, MI. Her fiction has covered everything from high fantasy to hard science fiction to modern horror. ■



his feet splashing through the water on the pavement. His clammy hands gripped her and tried to pull her up.

The heat shoved them both down, carried by the rain she called up and lost. Her eyes dragged themselves up to the fence. The blanket made for them pressed forward against the wire. The heat dragged it down too, down to smother them.

*Oh she die,
Oh she die,
Oh she die like this...*

Darkness blotted out the sky and stopped the rain. Wunderbred whimpered.

Oh, she die like this...

Rosey grit her teeth against the heat and pain pinning her to the ground. She drew the memory of T.Nut up from the pit inside where her heart used to be. She felt the darkness fall onto her skin, gathering her up into itself.

She jumped.

She jumped with both fists in the air, screaming at the top of her lungs, straight for the sky and the rain that she knew were out there. She burst through the blackness and saw the city, shining in the rain, washed clean for one instant by her own doing. Rosey felt herself fly free into the wind with time enough to fling her arms wide, lashing defiance into the rain and wind and all the powers that drove her life. In the same breathless second she saw the rent she made in the darkness open wide until the blanket was all gone and Wunderbred lay on bare concrete.

She never felt death take her, she never felt the concrete smash against her wounded body. All she felt was victory and T.Nut's arms around her. ■

PITFCS

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But that is not Endle's
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lover has died and left him
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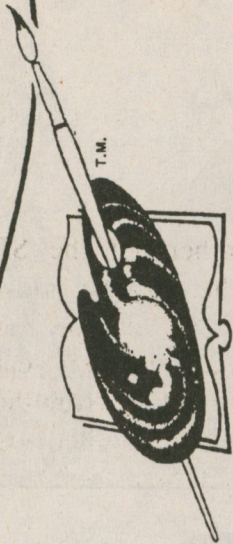
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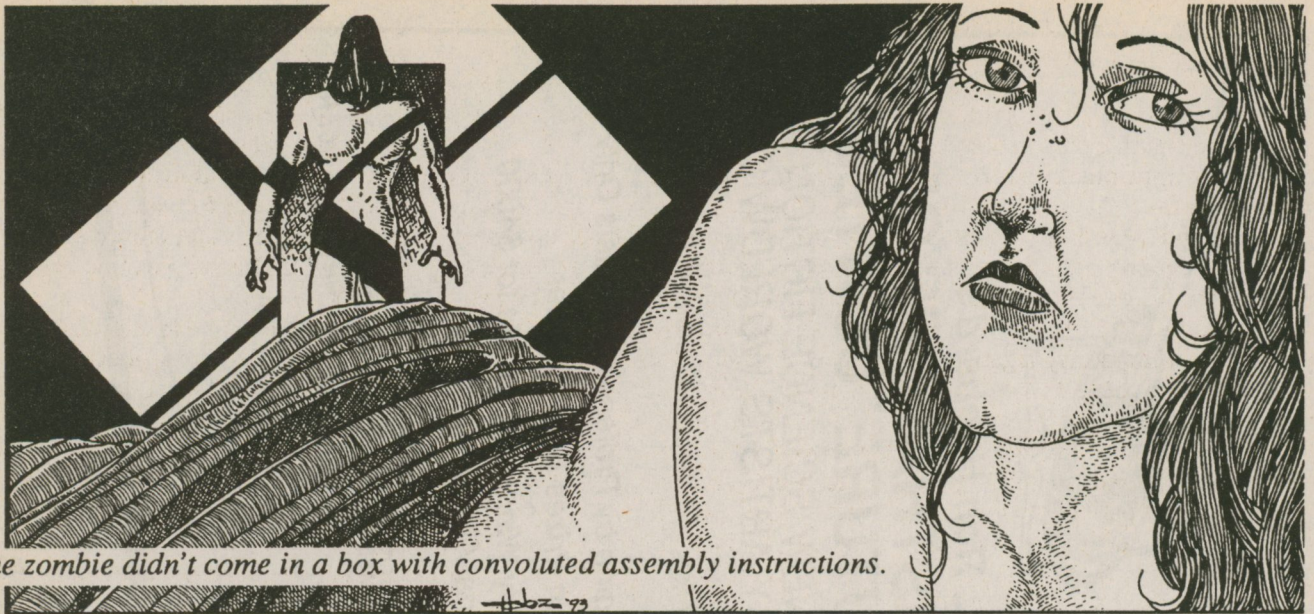
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The zombie didn't come in a box with convoluted assembly instructions.

INFINITY, INC

Della Van Hise

Illustrated by Bob Hobbs

The zombie didn't come in a box with convoluted assembly instructions as Nyla Prinn might have expected. Rather, he arrived by way of a black stretch limo that pulled up in front of her isolated desert home late one Friday afternoon. She stood in the shaded arch, shielding her eyes from the sun as the chauffeur opened the door bearing the seal of *Infinity, Inc.*—the world's oldest and most respected reanimation firm.

For a moment, she wondered if she'd made a mistake, if she'd allowed her own lonely emptiness to lead her down a long and dangerous path. Yet she had little time to reconsider when the zombie stepped out of the car, guided by a man Nyla recognized as the esteemed Dr. Richard Barringer. Neither was what she had expected. Barringer was older and less glowing than the ads painted him; and the zombie was taller and far more muscular than he'd appeared in the holos the com-

pany had sent her prior to final approval.

Swallowing hard, she tried to conceal her nervousness, reminding herself that *she* was the one with the power here. She was the one who'd written the check—and for no small amount.

"Good evening, Ms. Prinn; I'm Dr. Barringer—with *Infinity*? And this, of course, is Michael," the older man said as he stepped into the shade with the zombie following close at his heels. "I apologize if we're late. My driver had some difficulty locating your home."

It didn't take an expert to determine that Barringer's appearance had been styled after several different actors from the late 20th century. Absently, Nyla wondered what he'd looked like before the surgeries turned him into a carbon copy of half the male population. But beauty was in, and though she often hated it, she had the industry to thank for her own

incredible wealth. As the founder of *Thinly Disguised Surgicenters*, she could sit at home and draw a healthy royalty check without ever setting foot in the office.

The irony was almost pathetic. At 36, Nyla Prinn herself was considered homely, overly plump at 130 athletic pounds, and hardly attractive by anyone's standards. Her hair was the wrong shade of brown; her complexion was marred by three freckles on the bridge of her nose; and her breasts were an inch rounder than society's preference for the perfect 34.5 inches. She preferred it that way.

"You're not really late, Dr. Barringer," she said, concealing her instinctive contempt for the man as she stole a glance at the zombie with wide brown eyes and a surprisingly rich tan. "Won't you come inside?"

Barringer started through the door which opened at Nyla's voice command, then turned abruptly to

face the man who remained standing in the shadows. "Since you're going to be living with Ms. Prinn for the next year, Michael," he said to the handsome creature clad in blue jeans and a too-tight black t-shirt, "why don't you take this opportunity to look around? Familiarize yourself with the property and the gardens." He offered a smile that bordered on condescending. "Ms. Prinn and I have to go over a few stuffy legal papers, and I'm sure you'd be much more content out here in the fresh air."

The zombie—whose real name was Michael Summersnow—gave a little nod and padded away in new white tennis shoes that squeaked slightly as he walked. Nyla watched him for a moment, and had it not been for the mildly vacant look in his eyes, he could have passed for any other attractive young man in his early 30s.

As he disappeared around the corner of the house, Nyla gestured toward the door that remained open in silent invitation. Barringer stepped into the cooler sanctuary of the house, paused for a moment as if to assimilate the elegantly furnished home, then sat gingerly on an overstuffed white armchair that faced the front window. Opening a small briefcase he'd been carrying under one arm, he placed it on the glass coffee table and the micro-computer's screen flickered to life.

Nyla took the chair next to the doctor, glancing over his shoulder to glimpse the contract that would make her the official sponsor and guardian of Michael Summersnow for the term of one standard year. And again, she wondered.

"Why do they *do* it?" she asked, voicing her question aloud without really intending to.

Looking up from where he'd been fiddling with the computer's controls, Barringer chuckled softly. "If you're asking why people elect to be reanimated after their death, Ms. Prinn, I should think the answer would be obvious. Remember our motto over at *Infinity*: 'Don't give your body to science, give it to *Infinity*—your gateway to immortality'."

"Interesting slogan, Dr. Barringer," Nyla confessed. She'd heard it before. At least a dozen times a day on the vid-box. It *still* sounded like hype.

"It's true, you know," Barringer said enthusiastically. "Oh, the body is susceptible to accidents, of course, but the *real* horrors of disease and old age are gone following the reanimation process. A man truly *can* live forever—and with the added benefits of your corporation, he can even have the illusion of eternal youth. Of course, in Michael's case, that wasn't necessary; he died at 32, you know. We brought him back exactly as he was before—no flourishes, no additions. He'll never grow old; he'll never get fat; and if he avoids accidents, he'll never die. All it takes is a reanimation clause in your life insurance policy and a sponsor willing to caretake the newly reanimated for the period of one year. Quite simple, really. I assume you carry the standard reanimation rider?"

Nyla's stomach tensed; she didn't answer. The only thing she hated worse than an overtaker was an insurance salesman. She glanced out the window to see the zombie walking slowly along the fence line, stopping occasionally to study an exotic cactus or perhaps to listen to the quail who came every evening to roost in the high desert pines.

"Is it living?" she asked philosophically, her gaze fixed on what was once Michael Summersnow. "Is it *really* living, or is it more like a videotape stuck in a loop? What I'm trying to say, Doctor, is that the *memory* centers are intact—if your brochures are correct, that is—but I have yet to meet a zombie who seems to have any genuine *feelings*."

Barringer's expression darkened. "Actually, Ms. Prinn, we prefer the term 'reanimated' at *Infinity*. 'Zombie' is such an antiquated expression—practically a dirty word in today's society."

Nyla didn't bother pointing out that she'd chosen an isolated desert life because she abhorred that very society. "You haven't answered my

question," she reminded, then forged ahead before giving him the opportunity. "If they *can't* feel, then what's the point of reanimation?"

"There's no proof that they can't feel, Ms. Prinn," Barringer returned thoughtfully. "In fact, there's considerable evidence that their emotions are every bit as complex and unique as yours or mine."

"Evidence?" Nyla repeated.

"Well," Barringer hedged, "it's still too early to be sure, of course, but the fact that so many of the newly reanimated keep journals lends credence to the theory that they're storing information in the same way a small child does. Their feelings may simply mature with the passing of time. Many of them write poetry, you know."

"Mmm—so did Charles Bukowski," Nyla commented, not convinced. She eyed Barringer suspiciously. "The fact is, Doctor, that *Infinity, Inc.* and other companies like it have been doing reanimation for nearly fifteen years now. And to my knowledge, not a single reanimated being has ever willingly left the care of his custodian."

Barringer stared at her. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, Doctor," she clarified, wondering about his I.Q., "that they don't *do* anything with their new lives. The whole purpose of reanimation was *supposed* to be the wonders of immortality, the joy of living forever. That's what your brochures advertise, isn't it?" Again, she didn't wait for his answer. "It just seems to *me* this has turned into a tidy little for-profit venture—and the ones who are profiting are *not* the ones who were supposed to benefit. What's the purpose of living forever if they don't grow and learn—if they *can't* grow and learn?"

Releasing a heavy breath, Barringer leaned back in the chair. "If you'll forgive me for being so bold, Ms. Prinn, your background check didn't reveal any particular religious fanaticism nor any conscientious objector status to technology. In fact, you willingly agreed to be Mr. Summersnow's guardian. Indeed,

you paid a large sum of money for that privilege—all of which goes to defray the medical expenses not covered by the standard insurance rider in his reanimation clause. I'm sorry to say I don't understand your objections."

He didn't want to understand, Nyla knew. "Isn't it slavery, Doctor?" she asked, driving her point home. "Oh, we could sit here and play semantics until the full moon rises over Altair, but the fact is that your company essentially *sells* zombies. You deal in human flesh."

Clearly exasperated, Barringer looked away to regain his composure. Then, with a courteous and professional smile, he said stiffly, "The contract clearly covers that aspect of reanimation, Ms. Prinn. What you are doing when you make a donation to Infinity is purchasing the *services* of Mr. Summersnow for the term of one year. Indeed, these are terms he himself agreed to by signing the insurance policy that authorized *Infinity, Inc.* to perform the reanimation procedure. Since the costs are phenomenal, as you can well imagine, most people agree in advance to the standard one year of employment in the care of some generous benefactor such as yourself.

"The money you pay goes to recoup our costs as well as toward future research. Additionally, it allows the reanimated person time to adjust to his or her Second Life in the comfort of a private home, rather than in some sterile hospital." He glanced at the contract once more. "You'll also be pleased to learn that Mr. Summersnow initialed the standard restraining order clause in his contract with *Infinity, Inc.*, so you needn't worry about any relatives or old lovers coming to gawk or to try to take him back into his former life. That's one of the *other* delights of immortality—it's a completely new start, a completely new life."

Nyla decided that Barringer should have been a P.R. man instead of an overtaker. "People would agree to almost anything in exchange for the promise of immortality, don't

you think, Dr. Barringer?" she asked rhetorically. "They'd sell their souls—if they had a soul left to sell. In lieu of that, they sell their bodies. I hear it's become fashionable in Los Angeles and New York to have one zombie to drive the car, another to clean the house, another to cook dinner, and still another for sex. Rumor has it that zombies make excellent lovers—or did I read that somewhere in your brochure?"

"Ms. Prinn," Barringer said with great restraint, "I have already conceded that I do not understand your point."

Leaning forward, Nyla Prinn held Barringer immobile with a cold, hard look. "My point is this: to your knowledge, Doctor, has any zombie *ever* left his employer to pursue this Second Life you keep talking about?"

"Well—er—I...."

Nyla smiled softly to herself. "I believe 'no' is the word you're looking for?"

"You have to understand that reanimation is a relatively new technology, Ms. Prinn," Barringer protested. "And if you're concerned about incurring additional costs should Mr. Summersnow choose to remain in your employ at the end of his mandatory one year, I assure you that you needn't concern yourself. *Should* he choose to remain with you, it will be between the two of you to negotiate any new employment contracts. *Infinity* is only responsible for—"

Nyla waved him to silence, then reached for the electronic writing stylus attached to the micro-computer's screen. "Just show me where to sign, Dr. Barringer," she requested curtly. "You've been most gracious in answering my questions, and I'm certain you have far better things to do."

Barringer was visibly relieved to show her where to sign. Then, with the computer folded under his arm, he was out the door and hurrying toward the limo, never looking over his shoulder to where the zombie had sat down in pale desert sand to watch a muted pastel sunset.

There *were* a few instructions. Nyla found them attached to the contract's hardcopy which Barringer had practically tossed onto the table in his haste to be gone. Along with the documents was a small box containing a year's supply of valium. According to the instructions, it wasn't uncommon to tranquilize one's zombie before retiring each evening. Otherwise, the booklet informed, the newly reanimated—who had no need of sleep—would often roam the house, searching through cupboards, digging through dusty attics, or otherwise prowling about with plenty of clatter and racket sure to keep the living awake. No one was certain *what* they were searching for, and if asked, the zombies themselves didn't seem to know.

Additionally, it was a good idea to keep large supplies of paper, pens, pencils, and drawing supplies handy. Apparently, Barringer hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said the reanimated had a tendency to keep journals and write peculiar lines of poetry. Some, according to the manual, also liked to draw, though their art was seldom comprehensible to the living. It *was*, however, considered valuable for its novelty, and several enterprising benefactors had turned a tidy profit selling the doodles of their reanimated wards to stuffy New York galleries.

After quickly reading through the booklet and determining that it posed more questions than answers, Nyla tossed it onto the coffee table and sat staring out the window for a very long time. The handsome creature who had once been Michael Summersnow seemed content to sit in the dirt gazing toward the west, his shoulder-length black hair lifting slightly as the evening wind quickened. It occurred to her that he *was* beautiful, his body lean and powerful, his face a shadowed plane of sharp angles and mystery that had survived even beyond death. What intrigued her was that his splendor was natural. No surgeon's laser had graced him with Tom Cruise's nose,

William Shatner's eyes, Dan Quayle's lips, nor Patrick Swayze's chin.

He was, in many ways, far more real than the cut-and-paste ghouls who haunted the cities and thought of themselves as alive.

With that thought troubling her, Nyla went to the door and stepped out into the warm, dry air of the desert. For a moment, she couldn't speak, didn't know what to say to this stranger who would share her home for the next year. Then, taking a deep breath to steady frazzled nerves, she tried to smile as the empty brown eyes turned in her direction and long lashes cast shadows over the olive-skinned face.

"Michael?" she said softly, her voice shaky. "Would you mind coming inside now? I think we should get to know one another over dinner."

The seemingly gentle creature stood up gracefully, inclined his head in acknowledgement, then walked into the house, his tennis shoes squeaking an odd melody at his heels. As he moved past Nyla and into the foyer, he gave a polite smile, obviously well-rehearsed.

"Did you know I was a dancer before I died?" he asked as if inquiring about the weather. But before Nyla could answer, he continued on through the living room, past the kitchen, and into the bathroom. There, quite methodically and with great volumes of soap, he washed his hands and face before going to the dinner table.

For the first six weeks, Nyla mainly observed Michael, and usually from a distance. To keep him busy—something strongly recommended in the brochure—she gave him small tasks to do around the house. He was good with his hands and offered no complaints when he was asked to clean the bathroom, sweep the kitchen, or vacuum the stairs. It didn't matter that Nyla had a cleaning lady who came in twice a week to handle the unpleasant tasks. Michael didn't seem to care that he was often polishing surfaces that

already glistened, or taking out empty garbage sacks.

He was a decent enough conversationalist and a good companion—which was what Nyla wanted out of him—though normally he spoke only when spoken to and seemed reluctant to discuss his past. It was with some amount of difficulty that she finally discovered a little about who he had been—a male stripper who had headlined in the top clubs of Las Vegas, New York and L.A. He even admitted to having slept with more than two thousand different men and women, though he quickly followed that statement with one about how he'd been young and foolish and enamored with his own press. In the end, it was an overdose of Blue Heaven that sent his still-warm corpse to *Infinity, Inc.*

The only problem Nyla encountered was that, as the pamphlet had warned, he did have a tendency to rattle around the house at night. At first, he'd sat quietly on the living room sofa staring at the vid-box all night—mainly old horror movies carried on the Sci-Fi Channel—but toward the end of the second month was when Nyla started hearing the creaks of cupboards, the rustling of curtains, the rattle of paper, and the soft whisper of the door whenever Michael opened it to go outside.

One particular morning, she thought he'd run away; and though he represented a substantial investment, she felt a twinge of relief at the thought. At the very least, it would have demonstrated independent action, would have hinted that Michael Summersnow was still alive somewhere inside his newly reanimated body. But when she went looking for him shortly after sunrise, she found him sitting in the middle of the garage, surrounded by the dishevelled aftermath of what had once been a tidy arrangement of boxes, old furniture, and storage trunks containing outdated clothing and dust.

For a moment, Nyla experienced a twinge of anger, but as she stood looking down at the exquisite creature who sat cross-legged and

forlorn on the cement floor, she was inundated with the thought that the sadness on his face wasn't something that had been trained into him by the shrinks at *Infinity, Inc.* Frowning, she knelt at his side, tucking up her floor-length nightie and reaching out to place one hand on his bare shoulder.

It occurred to her abruptly that she'd never touched him before despite her initial intentions when she'd signed the contract with Baringer. His flesh wasn't cold as she'd halfway expected. Rather, soft and warm, it caused her to realize how long it had been since she'd had physical contact with another person.

"Michael," she said softly, squeezing his shoulder to get his attention, "what—what happened? Were you looking for something?"

The zombie stared at her with wide brown eyes, then glanced away as if guilty. "I don't know," he said, his voice bland and toneless as always. "I thought I heard something, Ms. Nyla, so I came outside to look and—" His voice trailed off.

Nyla almost felt sorry for him regardless of the fact that she knew he was lying. She glanced at the mess—overturned boxes, trunks with their contents scattered, furniture standing on end. A soft sigh pressed through her lips and her hand caressed his arm before falling back to her side.

"Well," she murmured, "looks like you've got your work cut out for you, Michael. It'll take you the rest of the day to get this mess put back together."

The zombie nodded with an almost imperceptible sigh. "I'm sorry, Ms. Nyla."

Nyla shook her head with a terrible fondness for the creature disguised as a beautiful young man. "Are you *really* sorry, Michael, or did the psychologists at *Infinity* just tell you to say that whenever your benefactor was unhappy with you?"

The zombie blinked. "I understand that my actions were wrong, Ms. Nyla, and I know I should feel—"

"Nyla," Nyla corrected. "Just Nyla, Michael. When you go around calling me Ms. Nyla, you sound like a slave addressing his master in one of those old movies. I don't own you, you know. I'm just watching out for you until you get your bearings again."

The handsome face frowned ever so slightly, the dark head tilting to one side. It could have been genuine curiosity, or could just as easily have been an action mimicked from watching too much television. "Do you think I will find my way, Ms.—sorry—do you think I will find my way, Nyla?"

It wasn't a question she wanted to answer. Despite her initial reservations, she liked Michael Summersnow more than she cared to admit. She certainly liked him enough not to lie to him.

"I don't know, Michael," she said, patting him gently on the arm before getting to her feet. She offered a smile, hoped it wasn't too wistful and sad. "But one thing's for sure: you won't find it in this dusty old garage. Now—come on inside and let's have some breakfast. I've got the servo programmed for French toast and eggs. Sound good to you?"

Michael climbed gracefully to his feet, stretched his muscles in an action that was altogether human, then followed her toward the house. "Melanie always made me French toast for breakfast," he stated in a nonchalant fashion.

Turning, Nyla studied him in early morning sunlight that made his skin glisten. "Melanie? Who was Melanie?"

Michael gave a shrug that seemed more like a muscle spasm. It definitely needed work. "She was my first girlfriend. We lived together for about six months. I miss having sex with her." These three things he revealed in a tender monotone. Then, cocking his head to one side, he asked with apparent innocence, "Do you intend to have sex with me, Nyla, or is ours to be a strictly platonic relationship?"

Nyla's heart slammed against her chest. Her face darkened and she

turned to the zombie in a moment frozen outside of time, looking him up and down and yielding to the same temptation that had made her choose Michael Summersnow above all the others. For the same reasons she'd cited before, she couldn't lie to him. And she was tired of lying to herself. Ideally, she wanted him to be human again. Selfishly, she simply wanted him.

"I—I guess I was leaving that up to you, Michael," she managed, taken aback by his question despite the fact that it wasn't altogether unexpected. Zombies were curious and unusually direct. But now he only stood there staring at her, leading her to the conclusion that coy games would be a waste of time. She sighed softly, knowing what she wanted, not knowing how to ask for it. Shyly reaching out, she ran her hand down his cheek, surprised once again to find it warm and yielding. Then, taking a deep breath for fortification, she said, "Look, if you want to, why don't you come up to my room tonight at eleven? Maybe you could dance for me a little. I'd like that—and it might help you to do some of the things you did before."

The zombie offered his usual smile—the one he'd been schooled in at *Infinity, Inc.* "You want me to seduce you," he surmised accurately.

Nyla tried not to laugh; but in the end, she couldn't conceal her amusement at his naive yet straightforward approach. "Come on, Michael," she said again, leading the way into the cool sanctuary of the house as she slipped an arm around his shoulder and found herself craving physical contact even with a zombie. "Breakfast first; then we'll clean up the garage; *then* you can seduce me."

"Tonight at eleven," Michael repeated as if to confirm the command in his mind.

Nyla laughed again, trying to deny the realization that she was rapidly falling in love with a dead man.

Though she'd gone to bed with no expectations and fewer hopes,

Nyla was all but flabbergasted when the zombie came to her room wearing his tightest jeans, a ragged leather jacket he'd probably found in the garage, and a pair of mirrored sunglasses the maid's son had left on the mantle the week before. It was, of course, precisely eleven o'clock.

Without speaking, he went to the sound system and inserted a disc, then moved to the dimmer switch and dialed the lights to a soft golden glow as the music began its heartbeat of drums that led into a wild synthesizer melody. And then the zombie danced for her—at first a series of acrobatic movements that were a mixture of martial arts *kata* and gymnastics, followed by an infinitely more seductive writhing that eventually led him to the floor. Each time the music changed, Michael discarded another piece of clothing; and by the time the disc was finished, he wore nothing more than the mirrored sunglasses and a smile that tried very hard to appear human.

Mesmerized, Nyla realized she'd stared at the magnificent creature without blinking for nearly half an hour. His body shone like wet glass, damp with perspiration and expensive oils he'd undoubtedly discovered in the bathroom. And though the room was in shadow, Nyla couldn't help appreciating once more the perfectly sculpted planes and angles of Michael's body. One such angle intrigued her in particular, and when the zombie climbed seductively onto the foot of the bed, wetting his lips with the tip of his tongue, she closed her eyes and lay back on the mountain of richly tapestried pillows.

Skillful fingers that showed no hint of clumsiness unbuttoned her gown, and her thighs parted when a gently insistent knee urged her to a willing surrender. Warm lips suckled at her breasts, nipped delicately at her throat. Powerful hands slid under her buttocks, lifting her up.

A moment later, the zombie entered her with a slow, demanding thrust that left her writhing in instantaneous orgasm. Her arms tightened convulsively around his

back, her hips raising to take every inch of him into herself. But instead of being sated, each thrust caused her to want more of him.

And so they danced together in the world's oldest dance, though Nyla lost count of how many times she climaxed during the first hour. After that, exhausted and yet exhilarated, she merely held him to her breast, allowing him to ride her until, in the early hours of the morning, he filled her with the hot, molten evidence of his own physical gratification.

For nearly an hour, Nyla didn't speak. And though she knew zombies didn't sleep, she began to wonder if Michael had broken the rules. But when she opened her eyes and looked up, she found him studying her from behind mirrored sunglasses. For the first time, she kissed him—a soft, delicate brushing of lips. Then, pulling back, she gave a tender little smile.

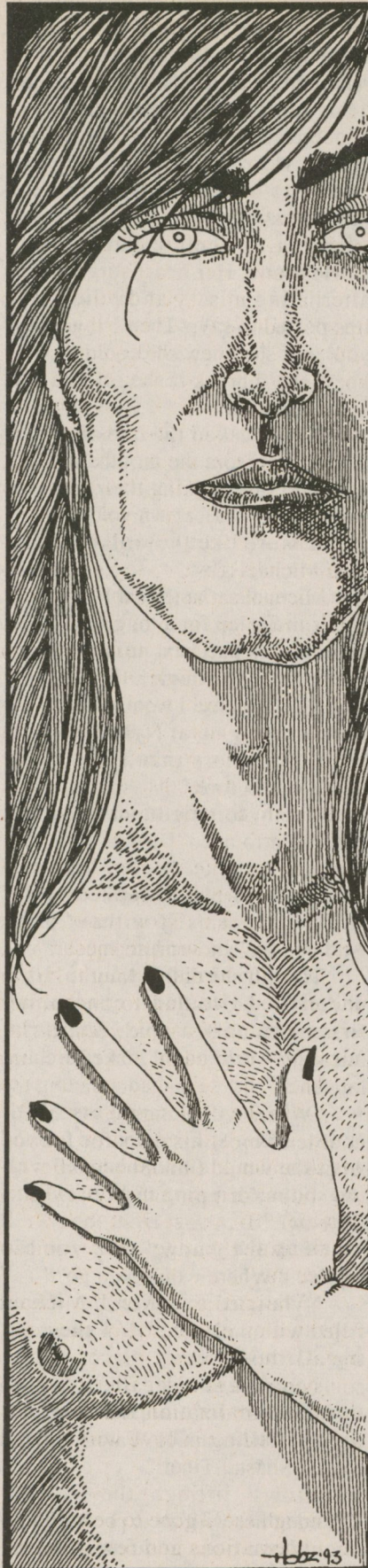
"That was wonderful, Michael," she said, meaning it.

"Yes," the zombie agreed, shattering the illusion of perfection with his whispered monosyllabic response that was undoubtedly meant to be sensitive. "It was good, Nyla. I would like to do it again soon."

Nyla tried not to be angry with herself for the realization that she *did* want to do it again. Very soon. Still, she found it sadly ironic that the only man who'd ever been able to arouse her had been dead for more than six months. She wished she'd known him when he was alive, yet she suspected she wouldn't have liked him much.

Not knowing what to say, and knowing that anything she *did* say probably wouldn't mean much, she rolled onto her side and closed her eyes, pretending to sleep. At some point, she heard the zombie get up and dress himself before slipping through the open door and padding quietly down the stairs.

A few moments later, the soft rumble of video voices began and Nyla listened as cupboards were opened and closed and closets were methodically searched. Finally, just before sunrise, the front door opened and squeaky tennis shoes went out toward the dawn.



Gazing out the bedroom window as if in a trance herself, Nyla watched her zombie lover dart behind trees and jerk his head in every direction as if looking for some mythical muse that could only be glimpsed out the corner of the eye. Only after he had explored every tree and looked behind every tall saguaro cactus did he sit down in the rising sun and begin writing in one of the many notebooks Nyla had given him.

Sadder and more empty than she'd been before they had sex, Nyla returned to bed and fell into a fitful sleep devoid of dreams.

It went on that way for the next seven months. The sex became increasingly kinky until there was nothing they hadn't done together; and Nyla's silent, secret love for Michael grew more desperate and more lonely each morning as she watched him chasing phantoms across the desert sands.

Occasionally, on the rare evenings when she found it necessary to tranquilize him to still his midnight wanderings, she looked through the multitudinous notebooks filled with his scribbles and notes. But as the pamphlet had warned, she found little comprehensible to the human mind. For the most part, Michael Summersnow wrote the same things over and over.

*Elusive it rambles.
A bird lugged it away
to a dream I had
when I dreamed.*

She found that particular entry eight times in one notebook alone. Another often repeated poem, if it could be called that, read:

*Nyla feeds me white chocolate
in bed and asks me to tell her
about you.
I make up fables
and smile steel.
She cries sometimes
and moves like sea-water
in moonlight
when I fuck her.
If she knew*

*she would send me away.
And I would go.*

Her eyes blinded, Nyla stared at the words written in dull pencil. After that, she never looked in Michael's notebooks again.

Nyla glanced nervously at the calendar hanging on the refrigerator as she sat across the table from Michael eating breakfast. It had been eleven months, twenty-nine days and some odd number of hours since the black limo first pulled up in front of her door. Her stomach tightened with an unnameable dread. They'd had sex the night before, and though it was as crazy and pure as it had been the first time, she'd been inundated with the feeling that something was wrong, something was missing.

In the year she'd known Michael, she'd grown accustomed to his silences and his peculiar idiosyncrasies—such as the fact that he always wore sunglasses to bed and always lied to her whenever she asked what he was searching for at sunrise each morning. It wasn't that she hadn't figured it out. She simply wanted him to tell her, wanted to hear him say he was looking for his soul. Ridiculously, she liked to think she could help him find it, although she secretly believed it was as lost as she herself felt inside.

"So," she mused, leaning back in the chair and pushing the cereal bowl away. "It's been a year, Michael." Her throat was dry. Her heart pounded. "Have you given any thought to what you'd like to do now?"

The zombie looked at her with eyes that were distant, haunted. He blinked, wiped the white milk moustache from his lips. "I don't want to hurt you, Nyla," he said. And though Nyla had taught him to mimic feelings by teaching him vocal inflection, she almost wished she hadn't. His voice was sad, lonely, and terribly human.

"But?" she prompted.

Looking out the window, Michael nodded as if to himself. "But," he repeated, "I have to go."

Nyla swallowed hard. Though it was what she'd wanted and though she'd hoped she loved him enough to send him away if he hadn't made the decision for himself, she was nonetheless shattered by those four simple words. She hadn't allowed herself to believe he would be the first of his kind—the first reanimated being to venture out into the world alone. Her heart surged with alternating misery and relief. Her lips poised to say, "Then I'll go with you", but she knew she couldn't. She knew she'd break if she offered and he rejected her.

So she asked the question that always fell from the mouths of children and lovers going their separate ways. "Why?" Her own voice sounded far more like the walking dead than Michael's.

Michael sat at the table with his hands in his lap for a long time. Outside, birds chattered noisily. Wind whispered through the eaves, singing. "Because I want to love," he said, looking up at Nyla at last. "I want to be more than I am. More than I was before."

Numb, terrified and in shock, she dared to ask, "Do you love me, Michael?"

Sad brown eyes looked away. "Love cannot exist without pain. And you have never hurt me."

Though she didn't want to, Nyla understood. He had to be human first. And only a cold, heartless, uncaring world could make Michael human.

"Where will you go?" she asked, unable to meet his eyes for fear of what she would find. She toyed with the spoon, dripping milk back into the bowl.

"I don't know," the zombie replied. "Where would you go?"

Nyla tried to smile, but it was filled with melancholy. "I guess I'd try all those secret places where souls are said to hide," she told him, trying not to let emotion close her throat. "The coast of Wales, maybe. Mount Shasta. Tibet."

Brows lifting, the zombie looked at her with an expression that might have been genuine surprise.

"Then—you knew all along. What I was searching for."

Nyla shrugged, reached out to give his hand a reassuring squeeze. "You're no different than the rest of us, Michael," she said, realizing it for the first time. "We all spend our lives searching for *something*. At least you've given it a name."

Michael was silent for a very long time. Then, pushing the chair back and getting to his feet, he leaned across the table to leave a kiss on Nyla's forehead.

"If I find it, I will bring it back here and give it to you," he promised, and his words caused her to cry. "Will you walk with me to the edge of the fence and tell me goodbye?" He stood looking down at her in his faded blue jeans and too-tight black t-shirt. It was all he'd entered her world with; it was all he would take with him. His notebooks sat forgotten on the table.

Nyla shook her head in negation of his request without looking up. "I—Michael, you know I can't," she barely whispered. "Not because I don't love you, but because I do."

The dark head inclined in courteous acknowledgement. "I think I understand," was all Michael said, though his eyes remained dull and all too dry. He started toward the door, stopped and looked at her once more, turned away again, then breathed a deep and weary sigh. "Will it hurt to be alone?" he asked, his gaze fixed on the window and the world beyond.

Nyla couldn't be sure if the question referred to himself or to her. She answered as best she could past the ache in her chest. "We're all alone, Michael." But she couldn't look at him. "We go in and out of one another's lives, but in the end, every one of us is alone. It's the way things are. It's the way things have to be."

Michael seemed to consider that during a full minute of silence while the world became a cold, still tomb. Then, coming to stand behind her, he slipped his arms around her and rested his head on her shoulder as he held her tight.

"I left a poem on your pillow," he whispered, his breath warm and sweet against her cheek. "I wish I had more to give you, but maybe it will be enough." And, with that, he kissed her for the last time, a soft brush of lips that lingered for only a moment on her neck. Then, without a backward glance, he was out the door that closed with a terrible sound of finality behind him.

For the briefest of moments, as Nyla watched through the window, she thought she saw another figure behind him—a pale, shadowy thing that moved with an awkward grace, darting behind trees and leaping up to perch atop stately saguaros. An instant later it was gone, and she had to tell herself it was only dust following at his heels, sand in the wind kicked up by faded white tennis shoes that squeaked ever so slightly as the zombie walked away.

*Not just words I whisper
when I say I'm sorry
for stealing your shadow.
It came to me on your tongue
when we kissed
and though I should have
returned it like misdirected mail
I wanted to hold it,
tender and soft like kittens.
When you want it back
I will return it
inject you with it
like warm milk
the next time we ~~fuck~~
make love.*

Nyla read the zombie's poem three times, staring at the carefully formed letters printed with a dull pencil. Her chest was empty, her eyes dry and dull. On her pillow, next to the wrinkled slip of paper that held her soul ransom, was a single black pill that glistened in the

morning light. That, and a business card bearing the 24-hour number for a certain company calling itself *Infinity, Inc.*

She knew then what she had to do to be human again. ■



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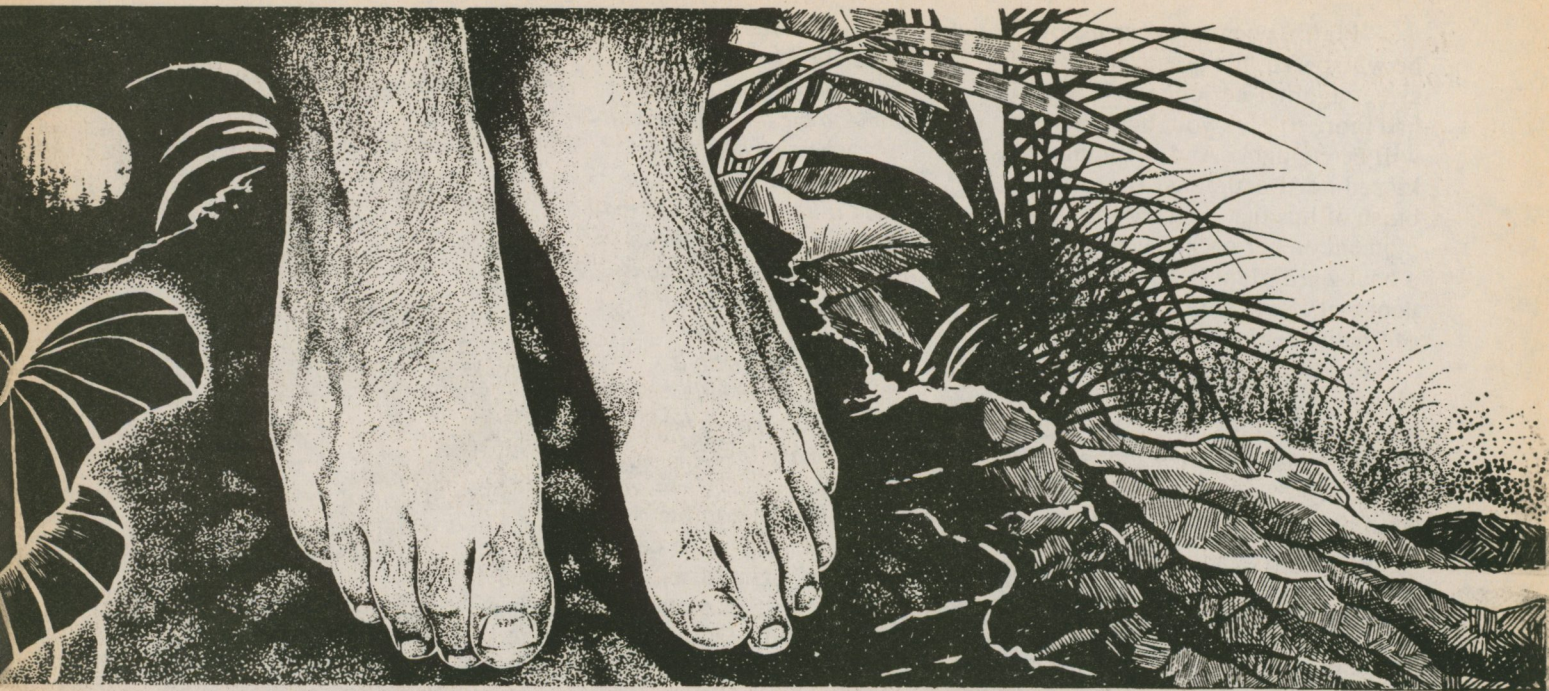
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ALMOST FOREVER

William Barton

Illustrated by Kelly Faltermäyer

When they buttoned him up for the second time, Ike Thomas was not a happy man. He was already dazed as they sat him down in the soft chair, padded with some unidentifiable ersatz material, and got to work. Three of them bent over him, two strapping him in, flooding his nostrils with their bitter/flowery body odor while the third shoved an 8-Charriere Foley catheter up his urethra, a sharp scrape of something like pain.

Odd predicament to be in. The smell of the three men was astringent enough to be offensive, but sweet, an amalgam of Listerine and Right Guard. Van Vogt guessed right. Other implications. But I've been here for six months. Nobody's complained about *me*....

BANG-BANG. The men at his sides fired implants into his shoulders, one after another, twin pinches

that he knew would make little dark ridges under the skin. Fuck. I wanted to be *awake*.... Faint dizziness assailed him; just imagination, the drugs would take several minutes to have any noticeable effect. God-damned twenty-third century....

The man who'd been playing with his crotch straightened up, wiping his hands on the front of his pale gray lab apron. "That's it, Mr. Thomas," he said in that silly, lisping lilt of theirs. "We've enjoyed having you. Good-bye." The man reached out and patted him on the head.

"Jesus. Call me Ike," he whispered, but the technicians weren't listening, just folding up their tools.

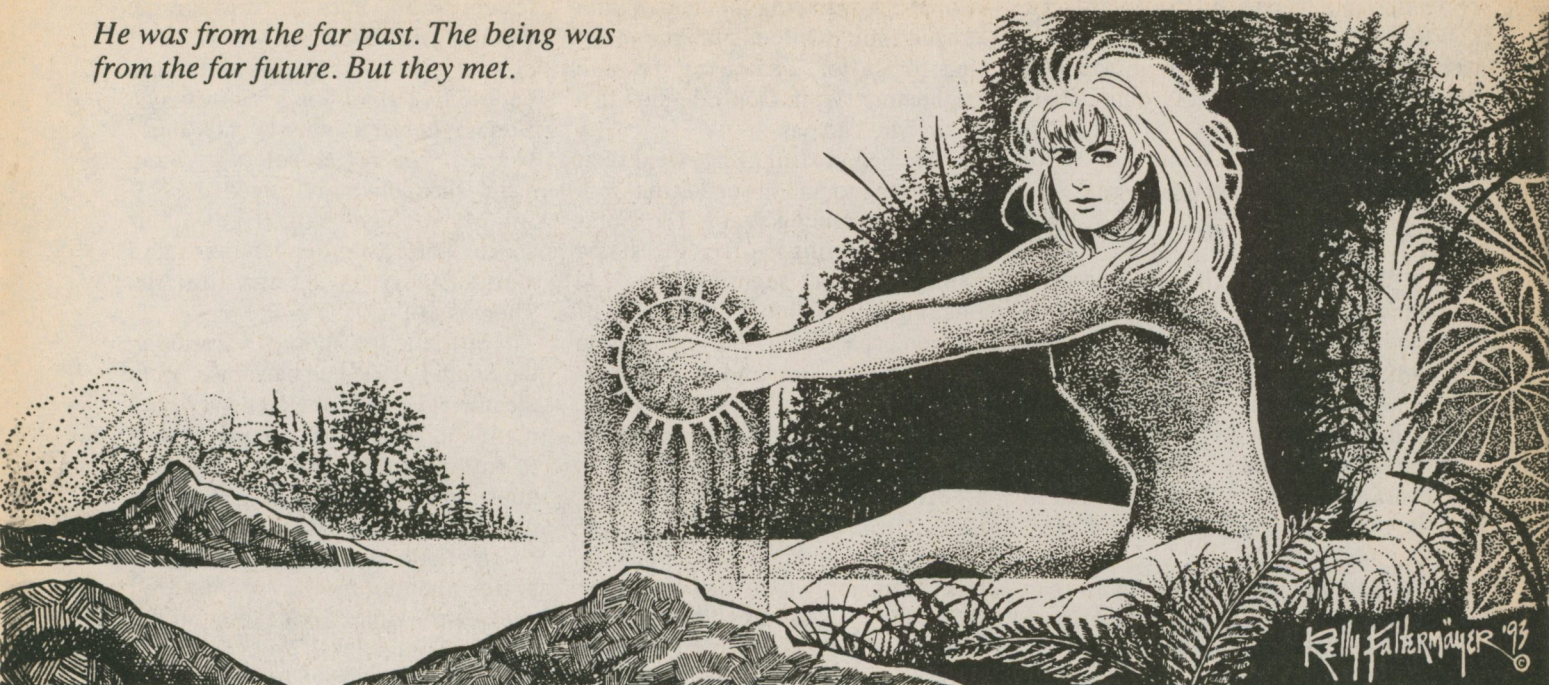
As the first real dizziness stole over him the men gathered their gear and left, gull-wing hatch closing behind them with a gentle hydraulic hiss. OK. The inside of the stasis

module was dimly lit by reddish-orange light similar to that used in some movie theaters back...when? Of course. Back when he'd been an old man, less than three centuries ago. When you first came in it seemed very dark; when your eyes had adapted it was bright enough to read by. The color and brightness of the red, blue and yellow idiot lights on the control panel beside him seemed unaffected by the strange illumination.

What's that smell in my nose? A little like thiopental. You'd think in 273 years they'd've come up with quick-acting, no-side-effects drugs....

The dizziness was coming on fast now, making it hard to think. A soft vibration was starting up somewhere, transmitting itself to him through the seats, making his buttocks wiggle.

He was from the far past. The being was from the far future. But they met.



Well, Mr. Isaiah Thomas, 1927-2011 and late spring to winter of 2284, hold *on*...

Out like a ligh-li-li.... He had just enough energy to giggle. What a good joke on the National Endowment for the Arts

Dream a little dream. Hazy and sick, walking along in his wispy little hospital robe, long last walk down the corridors of TransLife's Canadian clinic. Had to do it up here, after all, safe from silly American laws, more important, safe on the eternal, stable rock of the Canadian Shield. As if they'd planned for the *long* haul, but, no, just afraid of what an earthquake might do to their facility....

Lying in the bed then, sick old man, IV tubes at neck and arms and crotch, perfusion about to start, but first a little gentle anesthesia. Am I doing the right thing? Hell. Eighty-four years old and my *mind's* starting to go. Nothing much they can do for a sick old fart. Die? Might as well.

And a lifetime of reading goofy old stories suggested a perfect way out. So what if I never come back? Dead is dead, no more, no less.

The TransLife medico bending over him then, smiling, said, "We'll be *seeing* you, Mr. Thomas....

Fade to black.

And bring up the lights. Ike Thomas laying in a familiar bed, wake-sleep-wake-sleep.... Day after day like that, unthinking, full of image and mist, watching a tiny stage, where tiny actors played out incomprehensible dramas, room bright, colored shadows that might be men and women moving around him, unobserved.

Mind full of shadows, then. And the shadows resolved into three great bronze wheels, turning slowly, with fits and starts at first, almost coming to a stop, shooting arrows of fear every which way, filling him up with dread, then, gradually, running more smoothly. Too slow, though, if only I can reach out, make them spin faster and faster, wheel into world....

The ethereally pretty nurse was bending over him, concerned, looking into his eyes, filling his nose with an already-familiar bitter and flowery smell.

And he gasped something out, a faint wheeze of life-breath, "God."

Another whisper, "My God. Where am I...?"

The pretty nurse smiled, breath in his face, odd, as if she'd been drinking cheap perfume. "Well, Mr. Thomas. Welcome to the Twenty-third century!"

Just like that.

Days and days more, all very slow. They *couldn't* clone him a new body, do brain transplants, anything like that. Against the law, you see.... So the old one would slowly get better, cells under repair, repairing freezer damage, then age damage, then illness and trauma damage, and the old man would be...no, not young again, just not so *old*.

And pretty damn glad you had them freeze your whole damn body....

Days and days more, all very slow, filled with wondering, about the world, and about time. Sarah long dead, of course, can't help that. Dead, cremated, urn capped and long ago buried. Lost to me. Wonder what happened to my boy Billy? Not even sixty when I went to Canada....

Bitter vision, of a dream within a dream: Released from the hospital, free to wander the world, standing

alone in a weedy old graveyard, one that would have to be moved someday soon, looking at gravestones so worn you could barely make them out.

William Roy Thomas, all right, dead these hundred fifty years....

WHAM. Like opened his eyes on total darkness, stomach queasy, heart thudding in his chest. Peculiar sensation, not like the rapid pound of exertion. More like it was collapsing and re-inflating, over and over. Am I having a heart attack? No, you had a heart attack, more than one, back in the twenty-first century. Doesn't feel like this.

Something was grinding away in the distance, vibrating irregularly on his shoulders and back and the soles of his thinly shod feet. Slippers. Sent me into the future in slippers. The vibration stopped, started up worse, stopped again. There was a bad smell in the darkness, like oil down the burner of an electric stove, smoking, about to burst into flame. He remembered a time, hell, back in the 1980s, when he'd dumped over an entire frying pan of sizzling perch. The flame that had come out of the hole had been three feet tall. And the *mess* from the fire extinguisher....

Not supposed to be dark. He rolled his head to one side, queasiness increasing, and clenched his eyelids, then his teeth. Jesus. Try not to puke. When he opened his eyes again he realized it *wasn't* dark. Not quite. The idiot lights were still glowing. *All of them orange?*

Something is wrong. His heart started to collapse again, horrible clenching in his chest.

The grinding came back, worse still, this time accompanied by a little spark that popped and sputtered inside the control panel, throwing strobe flashes on the stasis canister's wall. Grind grind grind. Something wrong with the walls too. Instead of smooth, padded plastic it looked... shaggy, throwing a variety of lesser shadows.

You have to do something. The dizziness came back, went away,

came back, carrying the nausea with it each time, while his heart continued to flutter, beat irregular and frightening. Well. Don't die tied in a chair, Mr. Thomas....

He began struggling, weakly at first, trying to pull his hands out from under the retaining straps. The vibration was getting worse, the stasis canister almost seeming to *lurch*. Fucking impossible. I am outside of time and space here. They could drop me into the *Sun* and I wouldn't notice.

Of course not. Unless something was...wrong....

A ball of green fire burst out of the control panel and went up to the ceiling, lighting up the whole interior of the canister with its flame, making the shaggy shadows dance, but briefly. It was gone in an instant, leaving behind an afterimage that faded in its turn.

He looked over. The idiot lights were gone now too, nothing left but a dim orange glow, cooling metal. When that was gone it *would* be dark.

Well, shit. What a fate for a poor, resurrected old man. He struggled some more, got one hand loose, used it to unbuckle the straps that held his other arm, then liberated his torso and legs. The catheter. He touched it cautiously, recoiled. My God.... He pulled again, gently, and it felt like his dick was coming out by the roots. Retention balloon....

After a moment's hesitation, he pinched off the catheter's sidearm and felt the sensation of fullness recede. When he pulled the thing out it still felt like it took his bladder with it. Warm urine ran down his legs and soaked into his slippers, but eventually stopped.

After a while he stretched his legs out and leaned back in the chair. *Very* quiet in here. In fact...no, don't think about it. Can't help it. Something has gone wrong with your time machine, pal. Have to face that. The stasis canister timer was set to project you to the year 2784....

He shook his head slowly in the darkness. Last exit on the way to the grave. Die of old age. Go into the icebox. Come out two hundred and

seventy-odd years later. Make me young again? Well, no sir, we can't do that. Fix what ails you, though. People live *much* longer nowadays. You might last another twenty, thirty years, if you're careful. Not young again, then, but middle aged....

My money? You'll get a fair share. The rest went for taxes and maintenance. Have a nice life, Mr. Thomas....

Still, the few months vacation in the South Pacific had been nice. With the average age of the planetary population up around 60, no one seemed to find a healthy 84-year-old man unusually repulsive. Those Tahitian girls were *fat*, though....

Back in the damn box. Much better technology. *Five* hundred years this time. Make me young again. All quite legal. Pay your taxes, put your maintenance fee on deposit. Shut the door and, Good-bye, Mr. Thomas. Nice having you.

Eventually, he got up out of the chair and began groping his way around the inside of the canister. The control box, though dark now, was still quite hot. After he finished blowing on his fingers, which had made a brief but satisfactory sizzle, he began feeling along the shaggy walls. The stuff was really very soft. You could stick your fingers, your whole *hand* right through and rub it along the hard, smooth surface beyond.

Wish I could *see*...what is this stuff? Some kind of rock. What? Think. You *were* a geologist, back in the twentieth century. Granite? Impossible. No way for the canister to get inside solid bedrock. Volcanic, then? Basalt?

He started to feel sick, remembering the scene from the '50s movie version of *The Time Machine*. All right. They forgot, the timer failed, it's been a *real* long time and now you're inside a lava flow.

Last exit on the way to the grave? Well. Got here anyway. The air ought to be getting stale real soon now....

He continued to feel his way along the wall, pushing his fingers through at intervals to touch the

smooth, endless wall of solid rock. Not too good...in one corner, his arm went through right up to the elbow. When he pulled it back, brilliant, blinding light flooded through.

It took him only seconds to rip down what remained of the soft, fuzzy canister wall, squinting at the light and blinking away tears. Son of a bitch. The crack in the rock outside, a long passage toward the light, was about eight inches wide, gray walls twisting back and forth, closing in, opening out. In the distance, yards away maybe, was a sliver of blue sky.

Or feet away and inches wide.

He leaned into the crevice, reaching out with his arms, turned his head slightly and got his shoulders inside. Barely fit...he exhaled, slid further in, then pulled rapidly back out, heart pounding. God damn it! You *used* to do this....

Right. Used to. Back in the 1950s and '60s, when you were a slim young field geologist, too young and stupid to be afraid. Back before they promoted you to an office, and you sat through the seventies and eighties, getting fatter and fatter....

He looked down at himself, standing in a pool of bright and shadowy light. Slim again. That's what the twenty-third century docs did for you. In *better* shape than when you were fifty. Besides. Rescue squad ain't coming. Going to die in here....

He sighed, rubbed his shoulders, dithered, looked around at the shaggy walls, dithered some more, sighed again. All right. Head first. If your head will go through, the rest of you will go through, regardless of what has to break. He slid into the crevice, began to push along, pajamas ripping softly on the rock, hard pulse grumbling in his throat.

It turned out to be easier than he expected, sliding along, chest compressed between the walls, breathing in short, not quite panicky gasps, murmuring self-encouragement of the I-think-I-can variety.... One bad spot, slipping through a narrow place, exhale with a thin wheeze, Jesus, what if I get stuck now and

suffocate.... Ow! The sharp blade of rock whose edge he'd discounted sliced right into one flabby tit, blood making his hairy chest slick, popping him out into a wide spot where he could rest and breathe, sweat dripping off the end of a suddenly itchy nose.

He looked up with a start. The opening, with its patch of blue sky, hazy looking now, as if from very high clouds, was right above his head. He reached up, got one arm through, then his head and one shoulder, and hung dizzily over a tilted green and yellow landscape. Push! Get *out* of here! He pushed, slid out and fell, cartwheeling, another pulse of panic reminding him he hadn't noticed the length of the fall.

It turned out to be no more than a couple of meters. He grunted as he hit the rocky till, bounced, and lay on his back, staring at the soft blue sky, wheezing, listening to his heart sounds recede. Alive, you old bastard. *Alive*, again! Too good to be true.

He sat up suddenly and looked down at his torn shirt and bleeding chest. Just a scratch, no more than a quarter of an inch deep. Already coagulating. Nothing a healthy octogenarian can't handle....

The fucking *landscape*! He bounced to his feet, eyes wide. What...it was...nothing out of the ordinary. Low hills rolling away from the bland mountainside, turning into flatland, covered with grassy vegetation, dotted with tiny yellow flowers, patches of white ones intruding here and there. In the distance was a small, nondescript tree, with dark green leaves, and blobs that might be more trees.

For once he appreciated getting his vision corrected in the twenty-third century.

He turned then and stared at the hillside through which he'd emerged, reached out and touched the crumbly rock, and grinned. Fucking *lava* flow? You stupid son of a bitch. He looked around again. Interesting. The area had been desert country when he'd left, and this facility, unlike TransLife's Canadian redoubt, had

been placed in an abandoned salt mine, one which had missed its turn at being a nuclear waste dump, deep inside a....

Another look at the hillside, speculative, rubbing his whiskery chin. Damn it, I...must have *float*ed up through the salt dome.... Which...might take a God-damned long time.... Right. With the stasis field on, the canister would have been *dense*. Gone down, not up. But it didn't fail all at once. There must have been a period of falling density, when....

He tried to slow his suddenly accelerated breath. The implication was at least several millions of years. Probably more. A lot more. He squinted up at the Sun, bright yellow-white hole in the sky, small and featureless. Unchanged. Well. Theory said the Sun was slowly getting brighter, that the Earth would become uninhabitable some time in the next 100 million to one billion years. Another squint. The short end of that range had to be wrong. Because something like that amount of time *had* to have passed....

Another look back at the rock. Theory also said the Earth's geochemical cycle would wind down in just about five hundred million years. Deep breath. Air still OK. Well. It might take a whole lot longer for the biogenic atmosphere to destabilize, even with the carbon equilibrium out of whack....

Ike Thomas put his hands behind his back and began to walk down hill, walking blindly through a beautiful and remarkable parkland, remembering just about every science-fictional time travel story he'd ever read.

Some time later he sat with his back to a sun-warmed boulder, looking out across the downward sloping world, westward toward sunset, fat orange ball setting behind low, distant hills, sphere oblate and striated with bands of backlit cloud. Unreal, like a painting, like the imagery you saw at a Japanese animation festival. Thin smile, long memories. Back in the '70s? '80s? Some time ago, back in real life, one of his few conventions,

mostly boring, pompous nobody authors sitting on interminable panels, finally winding up in the twenty-four-hour-a-day film room, watching strange cartoons roll and roll.

His stomach ached with hunger despite the fact that he'd filled it repeatedly with cold water from every one of the many clean brooks, water gurgling over round, yellow-brown cobbles, that he crossed during the day. Something rumbled in his intestines, water sloshing its way on down. And his last leak of the day had come out clear white.... Another thin smile. Hell. At least I won't get kidney stones.

But you will starve to death.

Frown. Plenty of trees and brush along the way, though this country was still pretty dry, lots of flowers, but no fruit. No animal life to speak of either. One bird drifting high overhead, big bastard, must need *something* to eat, black wings square against the sky, like an eagle. Something scurrying against a distant hedgerow, little, like a rat or squirrel, but it would have gotten him through the day and night, one glimpse, then gone. A few bugs here and there.... He'd picked up a shiny black beetle and inspected it, indistinguishable from the common woodland beetles of home, six squatty legs waving as it tried to walk on air, then put it back down, watched it crawl away. Maybe later, when he was *really* hungry....

Ike rolled onto his side, still warmed by the face of the boulder, and watched the Sun go down, the sky grow dark.

And woke up shivering in the middle of the night. The face of the boulder had grown cold, radiating its heat away into the darkness, the grass around him damp with dew. Time unknown. He sat up, stomach cramping, and wrapped his arms around his chest, cut giving up a little splinter of pain, long, narrow scab feeling unreal, a disembodied part of self. What now? Nothing.

He staggered to his feet and stretched, then stood quietly, listening for the night sounds. Nothing at first, as if this were truly a lifeless

desert, spelling out the words of his doom in letters of silence. But, far away, distant keening, like a cicada. Chirr. Chirr. Something eating wood, or calling out for a mate. Another lost soul?

Australia. Southern Cross? Magellanic Clouds? Certainly *clear* enough....

He sat down again, back against the cold rock, not shivering, afraid now. Well. You knew this was true, but...right. It takes a lot less time for the stars to drift out of position than for the geology to change as much as you know it has....

Hell. Magellanics *ought* to be visible, if this were Earth, no matter how much time went by. Fucking satellite galaxies aren't going to drift away.

Another look at that alien sky. Look down by the horizon, wait and watch. A star drifted close to the edge of the world, not far from where the Sun had gone down, drifted and disappeared. Try to remember. OK. North must be that way.... Watch those stars, let time slip by, minute after minute. That star skimming the horizon, not setting. Patience. Don't think. That star rising already. No more than fifteen degrees north.

All right. Continental drift. Could I move this far in a hundred million years? Maybe not. Jesus. Maybe they just moved my canister around....

Pang of terror.

Where the hell is the Moon?

He got to his feet and looked back toward the east, toward the mountains. Stars and darkness. No Moon. Maybe it just hasn't come up yet. Maybe....

He sat back down to wait, hugging his knees, stolid, and, despite hunger and cold, despite a distant, nagging panic, fell asleep before the Moon could rise.

Ike awoke with hot morning sunlight beating down on his eyelids, skin prickling from the ultraviolet. Son of a bitch. He sat up, rubbing his face, blinking away sleep, groggy, wishing hard for a cup of coffee. Like those baboons on TV, blinking

and gagging, rubbing their eyes, and you just *knew*, if only they had coffee, or even tea, they could build guns and space ships.

He stopped suddenly, hands still covering his face, feeling a dull ache in his stomach. Stop. You know where you are. He took the hands down slowly and looked out over a familiar parkland world, domed by featureless blue sky, dark overhead, hazy toward the horizon. The Sun, fat, yellow, blinding, had been up for about an hour. Above that...two maybe three hours higher, was a slim crescent Moon, pale white, shadowed by sky color, uncaring.

So what do you want to do now, throw yourself on the ground and blubber thanks to Almighty God for letting you know you're still on the Earth? Asshole. Can't eat the Moon. The pain in his stomach sharpened, then died away. All right. It's not going to bother you, then. But you *still* have to find something to eat. And the memory of that shiny black beetle seemed less improbable today than it had been yesterday. Were beetles poisonous? Don't remember.

He stood up slowly, hips and shoulders creaking inside, back stiff with cold, and stretched, remembering the starry night sky. North, if it *is* North, if I'm not in the southern hemisphere, is *that* way. Right. No Magellanics. If this is Earth, then it's North.... Hell. No. Nothing to stop the whole Solar System from turning upside-down in its travels...or is there? Gyro-moment of the Sun?

Ike grinned to himself and started walking down the long, shallow hill, heading toward the east, where the Sun had come up. Read a lot of silly old stories, way back when. Wish I'd paid more attention to the science. Or the authors had....

Walking along beside a hedgerow, skirting a low hill that lay in front of him, Ike stopped abruptly, poised, listening. Distant gurgle, faint, musical, another brook beyond hill and bushes, where he would take yet another drink, cold water to numb a hungry stomach.... Splash. Maybe nothing, just water. But it made his

heart speed up, adding another increment to the slight dizziness that had been building all day. Splash. Maybe not.

It was late afternoon now, the air as hot as it was going to get, with an early-summer feel, fresh and clean beneath a slight breeze, hot but pleasant...a fine place to die. Not for a while yet. This is just hunger. Takes a long damn time to starve. Weeks, at least, and, sooner or later, you'll start eating bugs, maybe leaves, whatever will stay down. There *has* to be....

Splash.

All right. Real then. *Something* moving around in that little stream. Something big enough to make that noise. Deer? Maybe. How the hell can I catch a deer?

He crept forward slowly, climbing the little rise, bending to keep his head below the top of the bushes. Just a *look*, see what you're up against. The wind blew in his face, brushing the hair away from his eyes, evaporating sweat. Like Tarzan here... upwind, so it can't smell me....

He crouched more, putting the tips of his fingers on the ground, getting close to the hedgerow, then kneeling, getting down where the bushes went into the ground, little open spots he could look through. There was a clear view through to the other side, hill sloping down to the brook, more bushes here and there, bright sunlight sparkling on the water....

It was like an impact on his chest, sudden shortness of breath, wave of dizziness surging over him, pooling somewhere. Some kind of lightweight no-color shirt draped over that bush down there, what looked like gray jogging pants neatly folded on the mossy bank, next to a pair of sandals. A something, someone, splashing in the brook, just out of sight.... He crawled along the ground to where the bushes came to an end and lay there, listening for a moment, heart hammering. What now? Leap to your feet with glad cries, go rushing down to greet the bather....

But, fear of wilderness starvation having receded, all the old, practical

fears come back. No telling where I am, or who that is, or what the world might be like. Picture of myself, splashing naked in a stream, when, suddenly, a disheveled madman comes screaming out of the woods. Might have a gun. Might....

He pressed himself flat against the hillside, breathing slowly, carefully, then cautiously pushed his head above the brow, looking down into the brook. There. Facing away from him, splashing the water with his feet, was a slim, naked young man, hardly more than a boy. Maybe five feet five, narrow back, arms slim and smoothly muscled, narrow hips, long, thin, well-formed legs, head capped with medium-length, shaggy blond hair, cut in a fashion Ike hadn't seen since the late 1970s.

Well. No time like the present.

He stood carefully, standing up on the top of the hill and hesitated. All right. Do it. He cleared his throat, then said, "Um. Excuse me...." Voice hoarse and rough-sounding....

The boy spun, thin, handsome face surprised-looking, as if not expecting a human voice hereabouts, looked up the hill.... Jerk. Jerk. Arms coming up. Bright blue eyes, big blue eyes bugging out, mouth opening in a dark "O" of astonishment, arms up, as if warding off a blow, hands clawed, frozen, stunned....

Ike looked the boy up and down, wondering what to say, then, suddenly, down again, at his flat, hairless chest, then again at his crotch. Light blond fuzz of pubic hair moving on down to a barely visible fleshy divide, nothing else....

Ike felt himself blush, inane thoughts yammering around in his head, and said, "Uh. Um...I...Uh. Hello."

Shock passed and Ike was still standing uselessly on top of the little rise, looking down at...what? It? She? Hard to say. Human, yes...hell, just a titless girl, you've seen one before. Probably mighty damn embarrassed, hands about to go this way and that, cover up....

But she wasn't, clawed hands coming down, big blue eyes bright

with some kind of interest, leaking around the astonishment. The girl in the pool put her hands on her hips, apparently unconcerned about her exposed nakedness and seemed to smile as she eyed him, scanning up and down. She said something, a single syllable, maybe with a rising tone.

Ike said, "Yeah. Uh. Howdy, ma'm." Right. Like a cowboy in a movie. And this pretty and titless girl should be squeaking with alarm, rushing for deeper water, or, bolder, rushing for her clothes. Ike glanced at them, but the girl did not. Instead she started wading out of the water, coming toward him.

When she stood on the mossy bank, water running down slim legs, pooling briefly on the ground then trickling back into the brook, she stopped, seeming to wait, watching as Ike stood helpless. Finally, she spoke the syllable again, then a few more, gesturing around at the countryside, and, finally, up at the sky.

Ike stood on the hill, waiting, wanting to stare at her crotch, trying not to, uncomfortably aware that the last of the Tahitian girls were some weeks in his personal past, no telling how long ago, real-time.... Come on, goof. Important that you don't scare her away. She'll *have* some food. Besides, she's not even pretty. Other than...down there.... Right. Other than that, she looks like a twelve-year-old boy.

The girl jabbered again, beginning to look impatient, finally gesturing at the sky again and saying something that only sounded like, "??"

Ike shrugged volubly, exaggerated motion, and spoke slowly; "I'm very sorry. I just don't understand." Speak slowly, not so she'll understand, just so she'll get the idea these are words, not the ravings of a lunatic....

Dawning light. The girl smiled again, barely perceptible, then lifted her right hand and crooked the index finger once, twice. Well. Some things never change. Ike walked slowly down the hill, willing himself to look harmless, expecting her to take alarm, suddenly turn and flee when she saw how big he really was....

Brave little girl though, waiting calmly, hands on hips again, until he was right in front of her, big blue eyes inspecting him, up and down, increasingly mystified. What the hell have we *here*? he could feel her thinking. Pointing at the sky though.... Maybe she thinks I'm just back from outer space.

When he was standing in front of her, hands held rigidly at his sides, the girl uttered another syllable, spoken softly, obviously muttering to herself. As if: So. Here we are. She reached up and took Ike's head between her hands, very gently, a lover's touch, palms cupping his ears, thumbs reaching up beside his eyes and, for a moment, he thought she was going to kiss him, but her brows furrowed as she stared intently into his eyes, whispering something, more strange syllables, not even like words.

God damn she smells good. Not the perfume of your childhood, not the scented deodorants that filled the rest of that lost century, not the sharp, mediciney smell of the twenty-third century people; clean smell, fleshy smell, pheromones on the wind....

She let him go, stepped back, face puzzled, frustrated. A tiny shrug, a mutter of, "?"

Ike smiled like an idiot and shrugged, tried to imitate the phonemes of whatever she'd said, however indistinct. That made her cock her head to one side, odd look. What have we here, a talking dog?

Finally, she smiled at him then turned away, walking back toward the bush where her clothes were hanging. Ike watched her go, free to let his gaze wander, feeling a brief pulse of regret. Not *quite* so boyish looking now. But she merely draped them over one arm, then turned to look at him again.

"OK," he said, "what next?"

As if in answer, she beckoned to him again, *this way*, then turned and walked off up the stream, striding purposefully. Ike watched her go for a second, then, alarmed, scurried to follow.

Not even slightly alarmed, he realized, turning her back on me, as

if I could pose no threat whatsoever. Crazy? Just stupid? Or is this confidence I'm seeing? Am I in danger? Wry, inner-directed grin. I guess I'll find out.

So he walked along behind her, watching slim, naked buttocks twist and flex, propelling her quickly along.

By the time they came down off the brow of the last long hill and walked into the camp, Ike was staggering with fatigue, struggling to keep up with the girl, no longer interested in the look of her rear end. The sky was darkening, a complex shading of purple and pink, the Sun gone behind the horizon, and the air was starting to cool. And his knees were creaking, the muscles in his lower back sore.

He stood in front of a big, silky-looking tent, legs spread wide against dazed exhaustion, brushing damp hair back, staring around stupidly. Like a goddamn luxury safari in old-time Africa. *Hatari*, that's what I'm thinking of.... All those tents and stuff.... No servants here, though....

Silence. Soft wind blowing.

The girl had disappeared somewhere, leaving him alone in the growing dark, but now she reappeared, still naked, having tossed her clothing away somewhere inside. She stood in front of him, staring, still puzzled, and obviously concerned as well. There were, however, no more syllables. No more questions. Given up on making me talk....

Finally, she reached out and touched his sweating brow, almost jerking her hand away, surprised. She looked at the beads of moisture clinging to her skin, rubbed her fingertips together and shook her head. A syllable then, another mutter-to-self. There was a sheen on her, but no dripping sweat. She'd walked rapidly, mile after mile, barefoot and naked, without effort, without discomfort.

Young looking, after all. And me. Octogenarian. Wonderful word. He rubbed the sweat away with his palm, flinging it to the ground with a flick of his hand, and smiled at her.

"Old fart," he said. "Get it?" No response. He sighed and shrugged. Yep. Still an old fart, though the doctors made me thirty years younger. What if I *am* only fifty-five now? Still not young....

And she was looking him up and down again, eying the dark stains under his arms, the big wet patches on the shirt. You could almost *see* her nose start to wrinkle...Ike shrugged again, uncomfortable under her scrutiny, wishing, somewhat to his own surprise, that she'd just get dressed and let him be....

"Look," he said, "I...."

She lifted one hand, putting fingers lightly to his lips. Shh. Then she lifted the hand further, raising one finger. Wait.

OK. So hand symbols have stayed the same. And that's odd too. Because different cultures have different body languages.

She smiled at him, oddly knowing, and turned away, gesturing him to follow. What the hell next? But she led him around back of the tent, stopping before an...interesting structure. Pipes. Shower-head, even a little roof. Concrete floor surrounding a small drain. There was a tiny stand there, waist high, bearing a small, well-used cake of soap and a cruet half-full of some clear liquid.

Well, well. This may be the future.... Frown. The *far* future. But some things, apparently, aren't worth changing. Or are too nice, too useful, too pleasant to change.

When he smiled at her she smiled back, unmistakable this time, even showing a white flash of teeth between her lips. Then she plucked at the buttons of his pajama top and gestured away with one thumb.

"All right," he said. "I get it." Her smile broadened into the first real grin he'd seen. When the shirt was off and tossed aside, he kicked off the ragged slippers, ruined by the long walk, and stood waiting. She cocked her head to one side again and reached out, slipping one finger under the waistband of the pajama bottoms, snapping it. Well? she seemed to say.

Ike rolled his eyes. "What is this, some kind of strip show?" Still, she'd

pranced around naked in front of him all day without batting an eyelash, and there sure as hell weren't any tan-lines on that cute little butt.

Now, as if on cue, she turned away, fiddling with the shower faucets, starting the water up with a warm-sounding hiss, the best sound he'd heard in a long time. He slipped off the pajama bottoms and kicked them aside, stood waiting again. Sort this out later, right now, just get under the damned water. He could already feel it sluicing over his back, feel the slick sensation of the soap bar turning between his hands, suds rubbing all over, shampoo in his hair....

The girl turned back still smiling, stopped, recoiled, eyes suddenly wide, grunting as if she'd been kicked in the stomach. Just like that, stepping back, mouth open, face mirroring horror, maybe fear....

Long, long jabber of many syllables. Pointing. Right at his crotch.

What the hell. He looked down at a nest of black hair, at his fat, stubby, familiar old dork, then back up at the girl. She'd shut up, but now stood well back, not taking her eyes off him.

"Jesus, Lady. You'd think you never saw a man before...."

When she looked up at his face, he tried to smile, but she didn't respond, that puzzled look back again, mixing with obvious fear.

Next thing you know, she'll go get a gun....

"Hell, I'm too damn tired for this."

He stepped into the shower then, getting under the water. Sigh. Long sigh. Warm and nice. When he reached out to pick up the soap she was still out there, staring at him. He smiled and started lathering up, twirling under the water. Finally, he started to whistle. Let her get a gun and blow me away. I can't die happier than this.

Ike let his shower go on for a long time, singing, mindless, trying, if only momentarily, to forget what was going on. Just off on safari, that's me. Taking a nice warm shower after

a hard day's wandering around.... Out of the corner of his eye he could see that the girl was back, standing out there, still naked, waiting, something draped over one arm. Sigh. Get this over with....

Brief fantasy of her whipping the thing aside, big handgun revealed, plugging his ass, going down into the permanent dark once and for all....

You silly bastard. You're here because you were afraid to die. Like in the old song: terrified by the relative probabilities of Heaven and Hell.

All right. He reached out and turned off the water, slowly, one faucet at a time, feeling it grow alternately hot and cold, then stood in the relative silence, dripping, listening to water gurgle away in the drain. The girl was looking at him with calm interest, whatever fear she'd had vanished, and the thing draped over her arm was a big, fluffy towel, sky blue, not too different from the color of her eyes.

"OK, lady. What now?"

She cocked her head again, an already-familiar curious puppy-kitten look, then stepped forward and handed him the towel, stepping back...and obviously trying not to stare. But her eyes kept flickering downward nonetheless.

Ike patted himself dry and toweled his hair, watching her carefully.

Interesting manner-set. Not bothered by the fact that I'm naked, obviously, just by what she sees. Odd. "Amazon Women On the Planet Lesbos." Something like that. He smiled then and saw some response in her, a flicker of that nice grin. When he was done, he held out the wet towel, looking around, and she took it, throwing it down on top of his abandoned pajamas. "Nice habits."

But she turned away, beckoning, leading him into the large tent.

Inside, the big tent was like a living room, ground covered with a plush gray carpet, lightweight furniture placed here and there, and the girl led him to what looked like a long, low coffee table on which were placed several steaming dishes. His stomach lurched at the sight of it, then the



smell hit, faint but heady, like the aroma from an exotic kitchen...he staggered then and the girl reached out to touch his arm, feeling him shake. She nodded and gestured to one side of the table, then sat down gracefully herself, cross-legged.

Ike sat, feeling his water-logged stomach cramp slightly, started to reach out then pulled his shaking hand back. Careful, but...hell. It's only been two damn days since your last meal...or a million years? The girl watched carefully as he pulled the first plate over. Bits and pieces of this and that, things that were obviously vegetables, other things that seemed to be chunks of some dark, oily meat. Nothing, though, that I could put a name to. No silverware, either.... On a plate in the middle of the table there was a pile of small, thin, bread-like disks. As he watched, the girl picked one up and used it to scoop food from her plate. Right. A little bit like in an Ethiopian restaurant....

The food was mildly spicy, with a vaguely Middle Eastern flavor, maybe a touch of India as well. And it was gone all too soon. Ike sat back, hand on his stomach, drinking the last of a pale green drink that tasted a little bit like the watery juice from a honeydew melon, then put the glass down, feeling stuffed, a bit dazed. "Thanks, uh...." The girl smiled and motioned out onto the rug.

Well. Dream on, pal.

He followed where she led, sitting down cross-legged on the carpet, facing her, both of them beside a another low table. The girl tapped herself on the chest and said, "Shaaeh." Then the table, "Uruh." Then the carpet, "Yaro."

"Well. OK." Never was much of a linguist, but.... He touched the three places in turn, repeating the words as best he could. "That got it?"

The puppy-kitten look again. And she touched the three places, saying, "Anzheh. La'ur. Miyar."

Well. Now the hell what? He repeated the words, touching the places, and now she grew *really* puzzled. Frown. Head-scratch. Shrug. Three more touches. Three new

words, all faithfully repeated. The girl looked away and muttered to herself.

"Sorry...." He spread his hands, trying to look puzzled.

The girl stared at him for a long time, then began tapping herself on the chest, each time saying a different word, starting with the original "Shaaeh." As he repeated each one, she grew ever more upset looking. Finally she stopped, shaking her head, obviously bewildered.

Fucking Hell. "Look, lady, I...."

She put her hand to his lips, stopping him. Another long, intent look, then she tapped herself on the chest, smiled, and said, "Shaaeh."

"All right. Fine. *Shaaeh*. But is that your God-damned name, or what you are?"

She smiled and touched herself again. "Shaaeh." Then tapped him on the chest, eyebrows raised.

Hell. "Ike." Me Tarzan, you Jane."

She smiled and nodded agreeably. "Ike." A fair approximation. Tapped herself on the chest. "Shaaeh?" Pointed at him, "Ike?" Went through it again, then again.

"Sure, I get it. *Shaaeh*." Pointing to her. "Ike." Then himself.

Long, thoughtful look, not at him, just off into space. She reached up and brushed the drying hair away from his forehead, holding his head briefly under her palm, then she turned and tapped on the table.

Here we go again. "Uh. Uruh?"

She shook her head, obviously exasperated, tapped the table, tapped him in the chest, touched his lips, then the table again, eyebrows raised.

Well. Son of a bitch. Adjudged too damn stupid to learn the local lingo. "Table."

She touched it again. "Table?"

"Table."

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. "Table. Table. Table. Table." An intent look of inquiry directed to him.

He nodded. And light dawned in her eyes, a light that carried with it a powerful undercurrent of astonishment. Three taps then. "Shaaeh. Ike. Table." And a forth tap, on the carpet, eyebrows raised.

"Rug."

She clapped her hands gleefully, eyes blazing with delight. "Rug!"

Looking at her, Ike thought, Jesus. I never felt so stupid in my life, however long its been. What the hell is going on here?

It went on that way until he grew dizzy with fatigue, the night outside whispering, wind in the trees, the faraway voices of what he supposed were insects. Never cold though. The air in the tent stayed warm and comfortable, full of indirect light that seemed to come right out of the air as they talked on, Shaaeh pulling word after word from him, the names of objects, then shapes and colors, creating her requests for more complex concepts, verbs and whatnot, with increasingly elaborate pantomime.

Finally, he lay on his back in the smooth, fluffy pile of the carpet, staring up at billowing, silky cloth, head spinning. The girl crouched beside him, looking down, eyes alive with awareness and interest. She reached out and touched him then, running gentle fingers across his chest, trailing down across his stomach and abdomen, then away, leaving behind a trail of fading sensation. "Sleep," she said, and, "yes." Then she was gone.

Ike lay in warmth for a minute, then sat up suddenly. "Hey, wait, uh...." No one. Silence. Go find her? He started to get up, fell back. Christ. I probably couldn't walk. Everything seemed to ache all at once. Head spinning again. Stupid. Stupid. And this slim little girl, who would look like a child if not for that light thatch of pubic hair, was learning to speak English with alarming speed....

OK. Bound to happen. It's got to have been more than just a few thousand years, and people have evolved. Gotten a little smarter. Maybe no more tits on women. And, yes, she did have vestigial nipples, even though I didn't notice right off. Just nipples on a boy at first, standard issue....

Pretty, though. Very pretty in a boyish sort of way. Like that little

turn-of-the-century actress...pretty. Dazed speculation...I wonder how she'd be in bed? Jesus. Long, twinge-filled stretch on the carpet. I wonder if they still have beds?

Ike lay on the floor, watching the tent breathe slowly above him, thoughts growing fragmentary, loosing form, changing into dreams, until he fell asleep.

And awoke to morning-quality daylight, bladder bursting, hard on poking up into the fresh breeze. Groan.... He sat up, looking around. No one. Good. This thing an embarrassment, sticking out like that. The girl....

Yesterday like a dream. Wandering around all afternoon with a naked little girl, sitting up with her far into the night, teaching her English...just a dream. The same dream in which you died and went to the future and died again, going...where? And when? Yes, that. He stood, staggering, joints creaking and crackling, and went outside.

It was morning out, the Sun a fat orange ball no more than a hand's breadth above the horizon, cool out, breeze chilly on bare skin, raising gooseflesh. He rubbed his arms, hugging himself briefly, than walked a few meters away, into some underbrush, stood flatfooted and started to pee.

Christ. What a wonderful sensation. Cessation of pain, followed by a long, soothing release, urine splattering on the dusty ground, making a foamy puddle that soaked in fast, but overflowed nonetheless, little rivers starting up, traveling this way and that.

Ahhh....

When it was over at last, he stretched again and turned away, back toward the tent. Stopped. The girl, Shaaeh he recalled, was standing there, had been watching him, arms folded across her breastless chest, frowning, dressed in a sheer halter-top and clingy white shorts. Jesus. Caught in the act. "Uh. I, uh...hi." What else to say?

She shook her head slowly. "No," she said, then turned away,

beckoning: "Come." They walked around the tent again, back to where the shower unit stood, and Shaaeh pointed to what looked a lot like a little portable toilet. "This," she said. "Do here."

Ike felt his cheeks flush. "Uh. Yeah. Sorry."

She flashed a smile. "OK." She started to turn away, then looked back at him, and pointed to the toilet. "This?"

"Uh. Toilet."

Another smile. "Toilet. Yes." Turning away again....

"Uh, Shaaeh"

She continued to walk away, as if she hadn't heard. "Dammit. Shaaeh!"

She looked back, face surprised, eyes questioning. "Shaaeh. Yes, name me."

"Sure. Then why doesn't it *seem* like your name?"

Eyes puzzled. "Seem?" A shrug. "Seem." She walked back to him, slowly, looking up at his face, puzzled. "Seem." A nod. "Name," she said, touching her head, "in here. Not here." Touching her lips.

Ike shrugged. What the hell.... "And I *can't* learn your language?"

She reached out then and tapped him on the forehead. "No. Out not in."

Ike watched her walk into the tent, realizing that, dressed, however briefly, she looked more like a grown woman, less like a child. And what the hell was *that* all about, "Out not in?"

They worked away all morning, Shaaeh learning fast, Ike growing ever more uncomfortable, until finally, he said, "Look, if you're going to be dressed, I need my clothes back."

Puzzled frown. "Clothes?"

"Sure. My clothes." He pointed out toward the shower stall, where his tattered pajamas had last been seen, then reached out and fingered the hem of her shirt. "Clothes."

She nodded her understanding. "Clothes gone."

"Right. I need clothes."

She looked him up and down then, and smiled, shrugged, an appar-

ent imitation of his own mannerism. "Wait." She stood and skipped lightly away, going to the next "room," beyond hanging folds of cloth, and came back a few moments later, handing him a sleeveless shirt and shorts much like her own. "Big enough?"

He held them out, looking at them. Interesting. Maybe a boyfriend somewhere.... "I guess so." When he put them on, the shirt fit well enough and so did the shorts, but only after a fashion. The crotch was decidedly too tight. He pulled it down, trying to stretch the material unsuccessfully.

Shaaeh watched for a second, then reached out and fingered the space between his legs, feeling the various lumps and soft bulges.

"Hey!"

"Off," she said. "Take off." He did so and she disappeared for another moment, coming back with what appeared to be the same pair of shorts, only this time they fit right.

Ike stretched, feeling the snug fit of the cloth. "Right. I don't know what you're doing, or how, but...."

They got back to work.

By midafternoon, when they sat down to a light lunch of soup and bread, Shaaeh could speak in grammatical sentences, though her vocabulary was still small, no more than six or seven hundred words. Ike sipped the soup, imitated the girl in soaking his bread, and wondered. A language learned in less than a day. Shorts from nowhere. Meals prepared in seconds. And a luxurious safari camp out in the middle of nowhere, complete with what appeared to be a permanently installed shower hooked up to municipal plumbing.

Shaaeh was finished already, watching him eat. "More?" The puppykitten look again, part of her repertoire.

He dipped the last of his bread into liquid that tasted a lot like hot-and-sour soup, and smiled. "No thanks. This is plenty." The last of it went down and Ike sat and watched as she took the dishes away, beyond the mysterious fold of cloth. Not

even a sinkly clatter. When she came back, he said, "Shaaeh?"

Questioning look.

"Where are we?"

Alert interest. "In my tent."

Right. "And where is that? In the world, I mean?"

Puzzled, lower lip grasped briefly by pretty white teeth. "I...can't say."

"Do you know the words?"

"Sure, but..." She shrugged. "You don't know the...ideas."

Hell. "All right. Where do you live?"

Another puzzled look. "Right here."

"Are you telling me you live in this tent year round?"

A nod. "Sure. All the time. This is my...is *home* the right word?"

"Yeah." Ike sat down on one of the chairs that Shaaeh seemed to avoid, realizing he would've been uncomfortable sitting on them nude. So you live in a tent all the time. A tent that's always full of light and warmth, and fresh air that's never cold.... "What about the clothes? He plucked at his shorts. "Where did these come from?"

"These...." You could see her thinking about the grammaticality of it. This, these. That, those...another shrug. "Same as food. Same as shower water. You want to know about...I don't know. Mind-thing?"

"Uh. You mean a *computer*?" Visions of old SF stories....

She stared at him intently, then said. "No. Not...quite. Mindthing is...not a *machine*. It's just...." Word-struggle went on, almost visible. "People and world. Here. Come look." She led him around the fold of cloth and into the next room. It was small, dominated by what looked like a long white table, featureless, waist high.

He ran his hand over the smooth, formica-like surface. "So."

"So." She said, "Shorts," pointing.

And there was a pair of shorts lying on the table, just like the ones he had on. "Shorts for Shaaeh." The shorts were smaller. "Lunch." The shorts were a bowl of soup. "Nothing." The soup was gone, bowl and all.

"Holy shit...." It was no more than a whisper. Ike reached out and touched the spot where the soup had been. Still cool and solid. "How...?"

She smiled. "This is...just a table. But the mind-thing is...focused. Surfaces. You know. If I put the soup in my lap I'll...spill it."

"Uh."

"OK?" Big, bright smile, as if she were dealing with a small child.

"And this... 'mind-thing' isn't a computer?"

A tiny shrug. "No. People and the world. All together."

Right. People and the world. People. "Then...where is everybody?"

Another smile. "Here and there, Ike. Let's...go sit."

They went into the main room again and got back to work.

By dinner, Shaaeh's English was nearing completion as she grilled him about concepts ever more abstruse, more exploring his knowledge base than adding to her own. And the dinner itself appeared to be thick rib steaks with baked potatoes and sour cream, complete with knives and forks. Shaaeh only picked at hers, eating dainty little nibbles, watching as he fell to with gusto.

"You like this?" she asked.

Ike swallowed a mouthful, half chewed. "You bet. Don't you?"

She looked at the stuff in her plate and smiled. "Well. It's...very strange. Like eating a live animal, you know?"

Now that you mention it...Ike's own steak, cooked just the way he liked it, halfway between medium and rare, was leaking a thin sauce of watery blood that pooled beside it in his plate, staining exposed white potato. "I guess...uh. This is synthetic, isn't it?"

"Well. No. Not the way you mean. But it wasn't carved from a living thing, either." She seemed to shiver then, as if appalled by the very concept. "The, uh...mind-thing said you might like it, though."

That again. "And how does the *mind-thing* know what I like?"

She smiled, but it was thin and uncertain. "Well...the mind-thing had some suggestions...I...."

No time like the present. Ike put down his fork and said, "Shaaeh, you know I came out of the past, don't you?"

She nodded. "I found the stasis canister last night, while you were asleep."

Christ. Don't you sleep? No, don't ask. One strangeness at a time. And his heart was pounding hard in his chest. OK. This is it. "Shaaeh, uh...how long has it been?" A long moment of intense dyspnea.

She frowned. "I don't know for sure. From the condition of the geological strata...maybe a billion years. Maybe longer." She was watching him closely, her concern obvious.

A billion years.... "Jesus, Shaaeh, I...I...." He blinked hard, suddenly feeling sick. "I want to...."

She reached out and touched him on the arm, let her hand trail down until it was grasping his. "Not now. Just eat, relax, help me learn to talk. I'll go back into the mind-thing tonight, after you're asleep. In the morning I'll know. I'll...show you then. OK?"

"Sure. I...." Just wait. A billion years. Hell. You can wait longer. But, when he picked up his fork, his hands were shaking. One more thing.... "Tell me why I can't learn your language."

Her face seemed briefly sad. "Ike...I don't have a language. Not the way you mean. Just...constructs. Things like...meaning bits, uh...."

"Morphemes?"

Intent look. "Not quite. The constructs change according to rules, yes, but the nuances, much of the meaning...all supplied by the mindthing."

"You mean...like telepathy?"

Another sharp look. "Close. But...better."

"But you still have to speak."

She nodded. "There is the problem of...focus."

He thought about that. A language with a telepathic component. Oh! "Like Barsoomian!"

She smiled. "I understand. You...your mind holds some delightful concepts...."

Sudden cold crawling. "And you can...read my mind?"

"No. Not quite. Just its focus."

The morning dawned bright, cool and cheery, as, apparently, always, and when Ike awoke Shaaeh was sitting naked on the rug beside him, waiting patiently. He sat up, looking at her, curious. She was fresh-faced, but then she always looked bright-eyed and alert, never tired...and, now? Not even the look of someone just awakened.

She said, "Good morning."

"Yeah. You, uh, never sleep, do you?"

Momentary, distant look, as if thinking about it. "Not the way you mean."

Sigh. "I think I'm going to get tired of hearing that." Real fast.

She nodded seriously, looking at him as if she expected understanding. "The mind-thing is like...fast sleep. And," she patted her bare chest, "my body doesn't need to shut down for repair...."

Right. *My* body, unlike *your* old-fashioned carcass...he stood then, stretched and started out toward the shower/toilet area, stopped and looked back at Shaaeh, who was padding after him. "I, uh, think I'd be a little more comfortable if you'd... let me go by myself."

She shrugged, said, "OK," and went back toward the middle of the living room. When he came back, she was sitting cross-legged on the rug beside a low table bearing a light breakfast, fruit juice, what looked like bits of cantaloupe, a small pile of some thin, sugary wafers.

He sat, and said, "Um, aren't you going to get dressed?" Her appearance was an increasing distraction.

An odd look passed over her face. "Maybe not. Are you going to wear the same clothes for a long time?"

Right. Good thought. "How can I get more?"

A smile. "Just ask. If you...want me to get dressed, I will."

He shrugged in his turn. You silly old bastard.... "After breakfast, I guess." They started to eat then and, after a bit, he said, "Shaaeh, uh...."

She put down a slice of melon and licked her fingers, one by one, very serious and intent, like a small child. "I did find out for you. My guess was fairly accurate." She looked into his face then, eyes mirroring concern. "Ike, it has been one billion, two hundred seventy million years since you entered stasis...give or take a few million either way."

He sat, insides churning. Jesus. Hold it in. Hell. Maybe this *is* what you were after. "I, uh...I guess the theories we had about the Sun were...inaccurate, huh?"

Understanding in her eyes. "No. We refuel the Sun every now and again. Take out thermonuclear ash, you know? Put in more hydrogen."

Ike's heart seemed to clench like a fist in his chest. That did it. Refuel the God-damned Sun...he put one hand to his face, a hand that was shaking again.

"Are you all right?"

"Sure." Am I? I can't *tell*.... "I guess so. Um. It's...big. You know?"

"No, I don't know. It seems ordinary enough to me, but...I can tell it upsets you."

"Shaaeh...." Desperate feelings were chasing themselves around now, flooding his head. "*A billion years!*"

She seemed puzzled. "A long time, yes. A few dozen human lifetimes, in fact, but...."

Black ice entered his heart and froze all the feelings in place. A few dozen lifetimes...a billion years.... Casual, then. "Uh. How long do folks live, nowadays?"

She was giving him that *intent* look now, as if trying to peer into his thoughts. "Well. As long as they want, usually. Not that long."

"Forever?" Dear God, all of your fears unfold...and fear is why you're here....

"No. There are...geological processes at work in our bodies, after all, no matter how finely tuned they may be. I, uh, think I know what you want...." She seemed to consider. "If

a person never decided to...shut down...sixty, maybe seventy million years. Something like that."

It was like a pulse of triumph and freedom, fear leaching away into nothingness. OK. I made it...and...right. "And, uh, how old are you, Shaaeh?"

She smiled then, as if she'd caught the social nuance. "Well, we don't keep track of course, but...I'm just a child. An infant really, only a few thousand years...."

A few thousand years.... "I'm eighty-four," he said.

"How...odd. You seem much older."

He fell back onto the soft pile of the carpet then, wanting to giggle, to roar, to writhe happily, give way to a building hysteria. *You seem much older....* Jesus.

"Are you all right?" She was leaning forward across the table, eyes bright with worry, as if she must *know* what he was going through.

He grinned up at her. "Well, you know...people live for millions of years, clothes and soup come out of thin air and women no longer have tits...what else...." And stopped suddenly.

Shaaeh was frowning, looking down at her flat chest. She raised both hands, running them over its smooth surface, pausing to finger her tiny nipples, and seemed distant somehow.

"Jeez. I'm, uh, sorry, I...." Maybe they *did* have tits, except for poor Shaaeh.

She looked at him then and smiled a shadowy smile. "When I saw you, out by the stream, I thought you were an alien. A tourist, a lost explorer, something like that. Then, when I saw your...genitals, I thought you were an animal, something wandered off from an experimental apparatus...maybe even dangerous. But you seemed...." She shrugged. "Anyway, I looked it up while you were in the shower. I was...surprised. Ike...." Another worried look, and he knew the next bombshell was coming. "There...aren't any more women. Or men. Just people."

He sat up, heart triphammering again. Just people.... "I don't understand. You, uh...." He gestured to her thatch of pubic hair, and the vulva he'd been trying not to look at. "Then why...."

She nodded slowly. "We use... technogenic reproductive processes. There...aren't many children in any case. We're permitted one apiece. Usually right before we...shut down."

Leave that one for now. "So you, uh, don't have babies...out of your bodies?"

She shook her head. "We don't even have the organs any more. It was...part of the process that led to our long lifespans. A decision had to be made."

Feeling very dry and technical, he said, "Then what's that for?" pointing right at the space between her legs.

She smiled. "Just for show, I guess. The people who made those decisions, more than a billion years ago, had certain...aesthetic concerns."

"But no function?"

"Well...." She slid one hand down between her legs, covering the whole area. "The nerves are still there, so...I don't know. I guess the ancients had some ideas about what we might do..." a shrug, "maybe other people do them, even now, I haven't heard, but..." her smile brightened suddenly, "I just pee with it."

Right. And, suddenly, she seemed *much* more attractive than she had moments before. "So there are no internal organs. You just have a vulva then, and...."

She looked under her hand briefly, as if puzzled, then said, "That's it."

"No internal, ah...."

She took her hand away. "Just what you see right here." She studied the look on his face for a moment, then said, "You seem disappointed."

"No women," he said. "This is going to be harder than I thought."

She laughed out loud then, for the first time.

Once Shaaeh was done with the core task of learning to speak an antiquated human language, they began to vary their routine a little more, getting out for long walks into the countryside, up into the hills and further down the valley, with Ike getting the sense that she was simply resuming her normal routine, interrupted by his arrival.

They walked along under perpetually sunny, rainless skies, trudging along classic babbling brooks, sometimes wading through broader streams, though nothing like a river ever turned up, sometimes back by nightfall, sometimes not, sometimes talking, frequently strolling along in silence.

She was, he realized while watching her walk uphill ahead of him, outlined against a red sunset sky, like an eternal child, immortal, uncaringly happy, beyond boredom....

Easy enough to see why.

Maybe boredom is just an artifact of mortality, a feeling that there *must* be something to do, something worth doing with time made precious by its scarcity. Me, a thousand times over, always needing a task, something "worthwhile," resenting even the need for sleep. Classic phrase. I can catch up on sleep after I'm dead....

And so you did. A billion years of sleep....

Finally, it was night, many miles from Shaaeh's permanent encampment, but the breezes were, somehow, warm under an infinitely deep black sky, and they just lay down where they stopped, on the soft grasses of some featureless hillside, wind sighing through the trees, looking upward into night.

Without artificial light, the sky seemed clotted with stars, running in bright streams, so thick that even had there been familiar constellations, he might not have made them out. All those distant stars that he'd always wanted to visit, the ultimate in far-away lands. And always hating the death that would prevent him from going there, the knowledge that the future was closed to him, that when

the starships flew, he would be less than dust. Unless....

I always thought I'd have a heart attack or a stroke, die young... fooled myself. Lived a good long time, all those years spent humping my ass through the woods with a backpack full of rock samples and geophones. Finally died of... what? Ancientness?

Never thought TransLife would get me through to the future...I thought I was merely giving myself an easy death, just a forlorn spark of hope, better than believing in God and Heaven....

There *had* been starships in the twenty-third century, of course, brutal things, crewed by heroes, going out into the infinite dark. No place there for a fat old man with no more than thirty years to live....

Uh....

"Shaaeh?"

She stirred beside him, silent for a moment, as if called back from very far away. "Yes, Ike."

"What's out there?" One tired arm gesturing at the sky.

"Stars. Planets. Far away places. All of them strange."

He felt his heart quickening then, at this hint that it *might* just be possible.... "People?"

More silence. Finally, "In a manner of speaking. Sentient species from...here and there. Not human beings. Nothing of...Earthly descent."

An instant of bitter pain. "What happened? We didn't go out to...."

"Once upon a time. Long ago. But...what you call 'space travel' has been over for a long time."

He rolled onto his side, looking at her. She was lying on her back, knees up, feet braced, staring into the sky, her profile visible in outline. "That business about refueling the Sun? How is that done?"

"Machinery. We...get resources from some nearby star systems...." She pointed upward, two quick movements. "That one, I think. And that one over there. A few others that aren't visible from here."

"And the other species? You mentioned once you thought I was an alien...."

There was amusement in her voice. "In a way, that's what you are...." She rolled over to face him. "The younger species are afraid of us, of course. They stay out of the Sun's immediate neighborhood. Our own age cohort...well. The races we knew when we were young have... gone home as well. Most, I think, have long since...shut down. Older races. Maybe. I don't know. We learned from them once. No more."

On his back again, Ike stared up at the twinkling stars, bits of white light, a few with sparks of color, hanging far overhead, suddenly seeming very far away indeed. "So there are...no more starships?"

"Mmm...I don't think so...." Moment of thought. "Not the sort things you mean, at any rate. Robot ships that go out to collect starfuel...."

Silence, then Shaaeh reached out suddenly and felt the skin below his right eye, rubbed her fingers together, feeling the moisture. "It's a strange thing to be so sad about, my friend."

Back at the encampment, Shaaeh began to show him how to access information on his own. "I've...told the mind-thing about you, of course, and...well, there's a little interest, but not a lot...."

All those other people that Shaaeh mentioned, people he'd never seen. People she'd never offered to take him to.... "Can I learn to use this mind-thing?"

Shadowy look on her face. Maybe just not wanting to hurt him further. "No. Not...not the way I do. It's...." Shrug.

"Out not in?"

She smiled. "In a manner of speaking. The mind-thing is no more than our collective thoughts, of course, not something 'real,' but...a thing made up of thoughts can also think, after its own fashion. It is...aware of you. It can...know what you want. Maybe make things for you if I...help it get started. Help you get started."

Aware of me. Knows what I want. And some kind of collective consciousness. "Are the other people,

uh...aware of me also?" And reading my mind?

"Well...if they want to be, yes, but...." Puzzled look. "No one is."

What a relief. "But I can have the things I want?"

Another smile. "Within reason."

Right. No sense asking for a pile of gold and jewels...or is there? Maybe just no sense of asking for things that *can't* exist.... "Books?"

Shaaeh's head cocked to one side. "Well. No. Our...knowledge base isn't stored in a linear-verbal format. It'd take a lot of processing power to reorganize it along those lines. People would be upset."

So much for the limits of their technology. *People would be upset....* "Well. I'd like to start learning about...things. The world. History. People. I know virtually nothing about...." What then? Shaaeh was sitting passively, waiting for him to decide. "Something like hypertext?"

An intent look, peeking into his thoughts from afar. "I...think so. Um." Distant look. "Maybe we can work from some familiar metaphor...." The air between them shimmered, turning into a translucent cube that rotated to face him, a hollow box filled with shifting shadows, and Shaaeh had come around, sitting beside him, bare skin pressing on his arm, peering into dusty-seeming light. "Something like...." The shadows became a tray of manila file-folders on a rack reaching to an impossible distance.... "There are things like this in your memory, I think."

Ike shrugged, puzzled, and too overcome by the magic of it to make much sense of what was happening. He reached out to touch the first folder and his hand passed right through, dropping out the bottom of the box and back into his lap.

Shaaeh reached out and touched the first folder, depressing it slightly, pushing the tray back on its rollers, new folders appearing to fill up the space created. "You have to...just imagine that you're touching them, I guess...."

Right. "Shaaeh, I don't know if I can...." Heart hammering away,

beads of cold sweat appearing at his hairline. *I'm afraid of magic!*

"Try."

She reached down and took him by the hand, skin brushing his bare thigh, and put it into the open mouth of the magic file-box. When she pushed the file drawer with his fingers, the files moved, new folders appearing.

"See?"

"I guess...." Doubtful. But it had *felt* solid at that moment, slick and papery. He reached out and pushed the files on his own and they moved away a little bit. "How do I...?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Uh...something about history, I guess."

She shrugged. "Think about it. Push the files around."

Something about history, then... he reached out and touched the file, jerked his hands away as the files seemed to recoil, riffling away from him in a blur, then stopping. Well. "I guess I...." He reached out and opened the first folder, dropping the paper cover flat on the bottom of the tray....

And it unfolded, down and out, 3-D color image popping out at him, the world, recognizably Earth floating in the air before his eyes. "Jesus Christ...." Underneath the slowly rotating globe was a tiny filebox, brimming with files. And where do I begin? Where I left off, I guess. He touched the little piles, remembering his last days in the twenty-third century, and the folders spun away, dissolving into mist.

Engrossed, he didn't notice when Shaaeh unfolded from the carpet and stole quietly away.

On some days, many days, they played outdoors all day long. Not far from the encampment, beyond a hill or two, on the other side of some trees, one of the brooks gathered at a bend, forming a deep pond, bank abrupt on one side, gentle on the other, sloping up to a sandbank that was like a little beach. Shaaeh led him there every few days, running naked in the bright sunshine, to swim and bask.

While Shaaeh stood on the sand bar, going through some elaborate stretching ritual, sunlight bright on glossy skin, Ike waded across the shallow inlet stream, mounting the far bank, and posed above her, waiting. When she turned to look, he waved, grinned, then bounded off the bank, arcing into the air, poised, however briefly, then bending at the waist, going head down, plunging into the cool, sunlit water.

It was bright down here, the water almost ten feet deep, small fish, like goldfish, darting back and forth in a panic, fleeing from the terror of the air monster. He touched the sandy bottom with one hand, then broke for the surface, plunging back into the air with a gasp, shaking the hair and water from his eyes. He swam to the shore then, crawling into the shadows, kneeling in the water before her, rocked back on his heels. "Do you dive?"

She was smiling down at him, eyes alight with...something. "Yes," she said, "sometimes."

He gestured toward the far shore, then sat turning in the shallows, watching as she ran around. She had, he realized for the thousandth time, a beautiful body, lithe and full of...form. Like an athlete. Like one of those little girls who'd dominated the Olympic gymnastics competitions in the twentieth century. When I was...young.

Dim, dreamy regret. Back when I was young. Back when the world was young. Back when everything was...new. To me. To everyone.

Shaaeh stood poised on the far bank, posing for him, he realized, just as he posed for her earlier. Just imitating me, I imagine, still trying to make me feel...at home. But it was an odd pose, hip shot and awkward, foreign to her thin, boyish form...and then she spun and leaped, high into the air, far higher than he could ever have hoped to leap, turning, eyes on him even as she turned, one graceful pirouette at the top of her arc, then tumbling down, once, twice, in an impossibly short distance before she slipped into the water, hardly making a splash.

My God. A ten from every judge....

Ike got to his feet suddenly and dove for the deeper water, following her down. She was a dim blur reaching down to the bottom, ready to touch once and rise as he came up behind her. Now then...he reached out and grabbed her foot, feeling small toes against his palm.

She jerked away, looking up at him, and he could see the white flash of her teeth, seeing him, smiling underwater. She tumbled gracefully, a blurred and watery view of slim buttocks, then came upward, reaching.

He almost gasped as she grabbed a tiny fist full of his chest hair, pulling hard, giving him a sharp tug of pain, using it to thrust away from him, upward and away.

Owww....

He swam after her, stroking hard, legs pulsing in his best frog-kick, but she was quick as a minnow, a mermaid dodging his hands, spinning around him, laughing at his clumsy efforts. Finally, chest heaving against his determinedly closed throat, he had to break for the surface. And as he floated there, wheezing for breath, he felt her grab him by one foot, a quick tug, small hands grappling his toes, then gone.

As he swam back toward the shore, he could see her down there, paralleling his course along the bottom, following it upward until she was forced to the surface beside him.

Sitting in the shallows, breathing hard, Ike looked at her sparkling eyes, the water dripping in bright beads from her hair, and said, "You always seem so ready to play, Shaaeh...."

A shrug. "I know your word 'fun.' We're not so different."

"But...living out here all alone like you do. Playing seems like such a *social* thing...."

A bright smile. "There are always a few young people in the world, Ike. I see them sometimes. And even old people like to play. It's what life is all about."

Ike nodded. At least, he thought, it's what life *should* be about. I'm

glad I finally had the opportunity to learn. All those other days, older days, living my life in such a grim, determined fashion. Because life was short. Short and to the point. "Can I meet them?" A sudden longing. "The other people, I mean...."

Shaaeh shook her head slowly, frowning. "Not unless they want to meet you. Someday. Maybe." She shrugged.

Ike shrugged in return, putting away his disappointment, then stood and stretched, water runneling off his torso, splashing back into the pond, aware that Shaaeh was watching him, looking at his body the way she sometimes did, expression unfathomable.

Later, Ike sat outside alone in the darkness on a quiet hillside, the night and solitude banished by his magic file-cube, which now, somehow, he could call at will. When I'm alone, at an appropriate time, when I think about it. But only when I *really* want it, and only when I'm actually in a position to make use of it....

The text before him, the pictures, the colors and sounds, the things that reached out for his other senses, was ancient history. The old world, the familiar world, which had gone away in the era of his death, never to return, was new again, its people living in the little scenes before him, little dramas to explain things, to explain an alien world to these barely human people of the remote future.

Inhuman people, immortal, sexless, without want, without need....

And in the cube, long-dead people did those ancient lost things, animal things. A man and woman lay together on the ground and kissed and handled each other and made love, groaning softly in a lost and distant night. Ike watched them, aching to be one of them, wondering, briefly, thought always dismissed, if he'd been right, after all, to leave their world.

As if I had a choice. TransLife just a joke, a way to die happy, but die I did, as we all had to, in those days. This man and woman, moving

happily against each other, doing their animal deed, were so long gone that not even their dust remained. A fossil perhaps, bits and pieces, if they were very, very lucky. But, most likely, they'd disintegrated to molecules and atoms and been recycled into the substance of the world.

And maybe that is a better fate than this.

The erection attached to his lower abdomen, like an alien parasite, became solid substance in the night, begging to be used, to be done away with, a special form of misery, but he couldn't bring himself to act, not just now....

The man on the screen disappeared, his petty job complete, and the woman became a schematic, prying eyes reaching through her flesh to growing womb, to a fetus, yet another parasite, developing within her. And how strange it must seem to these moderns, humans themselves no different than the very animals that scamper underfoot in the private woodlands of their global park....

Now the ancient woman's vulva appeared in closeup on the screen, backed by a hugely swollen abdomen, leaking thin, milky juices, splitting open to admit the crown of a baby's head, covered with a sparse scalp of wet, matted hair, emerging whole, eyes squinted at the light of life.

I remember, he thought. I do remember. Being with my wife when she gave birth to our first child, a son, by God, crying and laughing at the same time as she watched him emerge in the little mirror, and me too upset, too frantic to pay close attention....

The long-dead woman gave birth in the air before him and Ike was dimly aware of tears trickling across his cheeks, soaking into his beard and wetting it.

All lost to me....

He waved away the image cube then and lay back on the dark hillside, staring into the brightly starlit sky, eyes gradually readapting to the night. All of it. All I have is what I remember. The rest is here and now. This empty, timeless world, and Shaaeh, its only inhabitant.

An image of her formed in the air before him, just a mind's eye view, not an image from the magical, mysterious mind-thing, which must know by now when he wanted to be left alone; Shaaeh standing posed on the hillside before him once more, posed hip shot and unsteady on her graceful feet, posed for him alone.

She was beautiful then, no matter how alien....

And, one fine afternoon, after a long walk that had taken them up into the highland forests, many

miles from Shaaeh's encampment, they were running among the trees, chasing each other, in and out through the forest, splashing through cold-water streams, laughing and shouting like the children they had become, heading toward ever higher ground.

Ike, well thinned now by perfect diet and daily exercise, as conditioned as he'd ever been, knew he could outrun her, but he held back, letting her pull away, then running hard, closing the distance. They would tire of the game after a while, as children always tired of games, then make their way to the bald rock dome they'd seen from far away.

And a picnic lunch would materialize beside them....

Magic. Magic in a magical world, filling him with joy.

I made it. Through death. Through life. All obstacles falling away. And here I am, through sheerest chance. I should be dead. The stasis canister failed, and I should have come to life underground, entombed, and smothered, and died....

Shaaeh was waiting for him on the other side of one last little stream, crouched, poised, ready to run away again, smiling at him, eyes alight. He stood still then, looking at her, fresh and young and thousands of years old. Like a child, he thought, and thousands of years old.



But she looked him up and down and her smile turned brittle, eyes suddenly shadowed with doubt, body growing tense.

What....

Ike looked down at himself, at what had formed out of desire, unaware. Hell...he looked up at her, apologetic, trying to will it away. "I'm sorry," he said, "I..." But what words to explain this business away? Forget about it? Sorry, Shaaeh. I'm just an animal?

She stood straighter, visibly relaxing. "It's all right," she said, "but...we'd better stop this now. Let's go have lunch." She turned away, trusting him with her back, walking toward the top of the steep hill.

Ike followed in silence, watching her walk, uncomfortably aware of his own pointless desire. What *does* she think? I'm afraid to ask. Afraid I might find out I'm just some poor dog trying to hump its master's leg....

They lay on their backs together in the night, carpet soft on bare skins, pillows under their heads, the universe suspended above them. It was the last era of Old Humankind, those bright days when Earthmen stood like colossi above their little patch of shimmering stars, no more than a few thousand years after their emergence into the greater cosmos.

The galaxy hung above them, a great spiral of colored metallic glitter, part reality, part schematic, peeling apart as the voice whispered on, of how humanity had conquered this little corner-speck of the universe, ranging outward in hyperdriven ships, transcending light itself. Human explorers traveled to the most interesting stars, to other spiral arms, to the core, then globular clusters, the Magellanics, even the other galaxies of the tiny Local Group. Useless. The Universe was still immense before them, unexplored, unfathomably huge. And the stars were all the same, alien intelligences all the same, unimaginably boring.

Where *do* we go from here? And why?

The frontier faltered.

As such things always did.

Those human explorers ranged far and wide, uselessly so, given the scale of the things that faced them, human populations had established themselves on only a few hundred worlds, stars and planets huddled close around the old home Sun. And why go further? No clever species truly needs *lebensraum*, and the other species wanted their little corners as well.

Just sit and stare and wonder. Is there an *answer* out there, in all that night-filled deep? Or just more nothingness?

In a world made up of things, you can only discover things. And none of the unanswered questions were about *things*....

And, as always, the spiritualists waited. Believers in Gods. Believers in Platonic Realities. Believers in Teleology. If we wait, if we wonder, long enough, the answers will come to us, fresh from the Unknown Realm....

And the genetic engineers and microsurgeons had always had that answer, as well. In order to wait, you need time. We can give you time. It was an answer adopted by the few, only a few hundred from each sprawling generation, among the billions who preferred to live and die. Just a few hundred. But they had time, and, in time, their numbers grew. Immortality breeds patience.

And, eventually, Old Humankind folded up its roadshow and went home.

Ike lay on the carpet, listening to the voice whisper out its sorry little tale, of how humanity had been reduced to a single planet and a sparse scattering of uselessly immortal children, grieving. All over, and for nothing. They had the whole bright universe in their hands and gave it up, retreated back here, so they could live forever. And why? So they could think mighty and eternal thoughts? No. So they could play outdoors and swim naked in creeks forever....

And never grow up.

He put his hands behind his head, staring upward beyond the spi-

ral galaxy, at the tent's billowing silk roof. Lots of silly stories about that. And who are you to point the finger of blame? If you hadn't been afraid to die, you wouldn't be here. Maybe this is where you belong, in some eternally empty Heaven....

He turned on his side and looked over at Shaaeh, lying flat on her back, naked as she usually was, one leg extended, the other folded up, blue eyes absorbed in the events and visions portrayed in the air overhead. Maybe she never knew these things. Or even cared. Does history mean *anything* to these people? Shaaeh alone has lived longer than the events we've just witnessed took to occur. And most of the rest have...lived out the vast, featureless bulk of human history....

Her face was very pretty now, soft and relaxed, moving slightly as her mind responded to the drama playing out above, perhaps sorrowing for all the dead people who lived so long ago, or pitying them. Very pretty....

Ike reached out his left hand and placed it flat on the cool-warm skin of her stomach, feeling tightly conditioned young muscles flex gently, then she started, looking up at him, surprised, and he leaned down, kissed her gently on the lips.

They were warm and dry, momentarily still under his own, then she jerked hard and rolled away from him, coming up into a crouch a few feet away, wide-eyed and wary. A whisper, "What...."

Ike sat back on the carpet, confused, suddenly full of regret. What the hell were you trying to do? And what did you expect? Like something out of a silly old movie, an image of the fantasy girl who loves her puppy so much she spreads her dainty legs for it? And what do you tell her now, for God's sake? "Sorry, I, uh...." Hell. He gestured uselessly. "You have access to a lot of information, Shaaeh...." He motioned toward the now-stilled galaxy above them. "You, uh...." Give it up. Simplify. "I'd think you would...understand what this is all about...."

Her eyes widened further and the tension of her crouch increased, as if she were about to spring up and run away. And who would blame her? Bitter thought. And she said, "Ike, I... Yes I do, but..." Long look away, as if staring into her own depths, classic soul-searching, then back, straight at his face, forthright, clear, honest: "I... know what you want, but... what can you be thinking? We don't even have matching organs..."

What can you be thinking, the mind-reader said, because seeming is not being... Ike smiled at her. "There is," he said, heart thundering out its triumph, "more than one way to skin a cat."

A little while later, after a longish meal lengthened by silence, they were sitting together on the carpet again, the spiral galaxy still spread frozen-winged above them. Shaaeh sat leaning back against the couch, looking up at it wistfully, carelessly sprawled, and Ike looked at her, aware of the carelessness, wondering what significance it had, if any.

She sighed, hugged herself, rocking gently from side to side, looking up at the motionless, glittery thing, and said, "You have to wonder about the lives they led. So full of wonder and... doing. I never looked at things like this before, or gave them much thought. They seemed... inconsequential. Far away. Forgotten. Forgettable. Just a part of humanity's... animal past. Now..." She made a vague hand movement, up at the galaxy. "Their lives were... more than I thought." She looked over at him, blue eyes caught in deep shadow, made mysterious, cloaking her face momentarily in some exotic beauty. "You lived one of those lives, I think..."

Ike shrugged, trying to keep his eyes off her, not wanting an immediate repeat of his earlier *faux pas*. "I suppose so."

"And did it seem... exotic and..." She waved at the galaxy, which suddenly seemed like nothing more than a meaningless pile of twinkling flakes, no more significant

than any other accidental assemblage. "You know..."

God, I do know. Looking into the future. Or back into the past. All lives seem more... interesting than the one we alone possess. "No. It seemed very small to me. I... lived for a little while. Then it was time to die."

She nodded slowly, staring at him. "Dying frightened you, then."

"It still does." Even though, he realized, it's gotten very far away indeed.

"It seems so strange..." Wistful look, farther into the shadows.

Ike looked down at her, small, fragile, so childlike, and said, "And how do I seem to you? Merely strange?"

She looked back up at him and he could see her retreating from that edge, not wanting to hurt him. "At first..." a shrug. "Yes. Merely strange. Very exotic. Alien." Inward look again. "Some aliens did come once, millennia and more before I was born. It seems to have been very... exciting." She looked into his face and smiled. "You see I do know how you feel. I haven't lived long enough yet to forget about excitement."

I wonder how long it takes? Will I find out? Perhaps I will.... "It's a part of your considerable charm, Shaaeh..." Shit. Careful....

That shadowed look, a troubled look, was back, controlled and precise. "'Considerable charm'," she repeated. "Well."

Damn it. "Sorry. I..."

She reached out and touched him gently on the arm. "Don't be. I..." To his astonishment, she looked away from him, seemed to blush. "I've been thinking about... things." She looked into his eyes then, face earnest, as if willing him to understand. "The knowledge in the mind-thing is... well, finite, of course, but it goes far beyond its mere *collectivity*. Once I knew what you were, I began to study... well. I watched what you were watching, saw what interested you, and tried to understand..." Another seeming blush, another looking away. Both-

ered, troubled.... "And maybe I have understood. And you've been here with me, all the while. So... atavistic and *strange*. I don't know."

She fell silent for a moment, staring into the invisible depths, and Ike sat watching her, wondering what was going on beneath that smooth brow, wishing now that he had that power simply to *see*. For I cannot interpret what I'm looking at. This isn't a woman of the twentieth century, nor even of the twenty-third... My assumptions must all be wrong.

And, finally, she looked up at him again. "It's had its effect on me," she said. Faint smile. "I don't know what the original designers of my kind had in mind, but..." She reached out and touched him on the arm again, gently, quickly taking her fingers away, as if she expected an electric shock.

"What do you mean?" Behavioral clues, false cognates, all quite meaningless, but listen as my heart begins to race....

She moved a little closer to him, fingers reaching out to trace a tiny design on forearm skin that began to tingle with unwanted anticipation, and Ike felt hormonal floodgates opening, fighting dismay, an intensity of regret that belonged to a former life.

She said, "I feel like what you call a... pervert, you know?" And she looked up at his face, smiling tentatively, something in her eyes not quite right. "You are, I think, to me, something subhuman, brought back from the misty beginnings of my race. And I think you tap into something... left over. Not quite vestigial..."

God in Heaven....

She was quite close to him then, kneeling up, peering into his eyes. "That thing you did to me before dinner," she whispered. "Please try that again..."

As he kissed her, Ike thought, I am not the first man to be seduced by a child. And, of course, she's thousands of years old. My whole lifetime could pass for her like a single long afternoon....

He lay on his back in the cool dimness of later night, watching the ceiling billow and ripple, Shaah's small weight an inert shape across his chest. Not asleep, no. She never sleeps. Perhaps she cannot sleep. Just waiting for me to sleep. Lying here, very still, because, perhaps she knows I expect it. Mind full of thoughts, though. Perhaps receded, gone away into this mind-thing of hers, with all the world's unknown people. Telling them.

In any case, as she said, despite the limitations dictated by their manifest...*differences*, some things, *nerves* at any rate, seemed to be intact. For both of them.

Interesting that the light faded of its own accord, bathing us in this dreamy blue dusk, helping to create a mood, then preserve it in the face of....

Oh, stop it. Just your imagination, your old fears running riot. Real women put up with these things, even looked forward to them... why not *this* little being then? Because, the faint voice whispered, she *isn't*....

He reached up and stroked her shoulders, ran his hand down the long, shallow trough of her spine, across small, smooth buttocks, and smiled into the darkness. Maybe not but, just right now, it didn't seem to matter....

He nuzzled the top of her head, drifting away into imagination, then dreams, and, not quite aware, slipped away into sleep. ■



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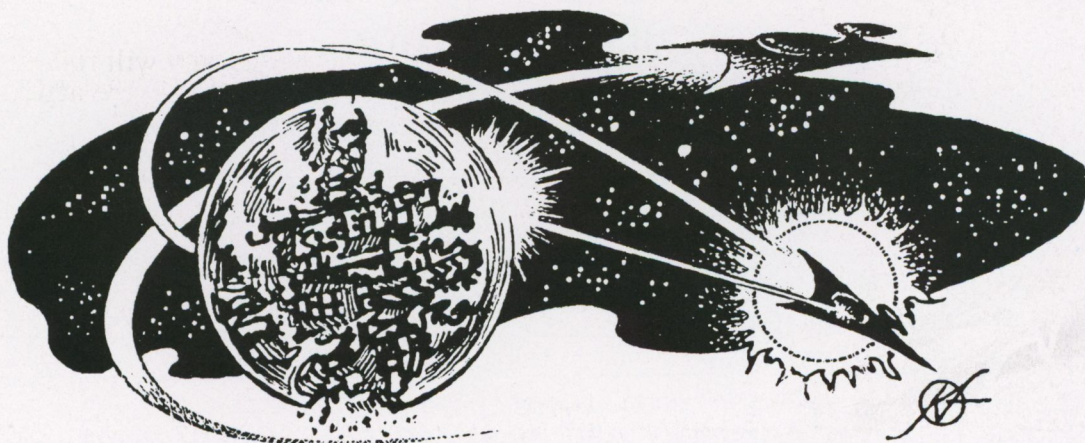
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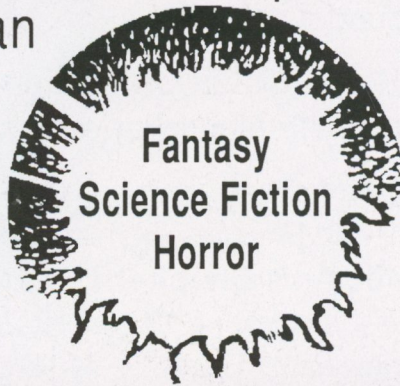
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